Kathleen Seidel



Maybe This Time

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MAYBE THIS TIME

Also by Kathleen Seidel

Again
More Than You Dreamed
Till the Stars Fall

Maybe This Time

Kathleen Seidel



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For Dory and Lily

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one

Emily Gordon had spent the last week visiting gyms, seedy, inner-city gyms smelling of towels and rope. She went to such places to talk to amateur boxers. They were very young men; most were inarticulate, some were illegal, but all wanted to fight their way to a better life. Emily was searching them out to tell them that if they were as good as they thought they were, Hemphill and Associates, the sports management agency she worked for, could help. "You, too," was the message of her clothes, her limo, her driver—"You, too, can have all this."

While she enjoyed her expensive clothes, Emily didn't care much about the limousine. She liked to drive herself. She was good with maps; she could always find the headlight switch on rented cars. But the limousines on this trip weren't only for show; they were also for safety. These gyms in Baltimore and Atlantic City, Philadelphia and Detroit, were on streets that weren't very comfortable for a woman alone with a Hertz car.

But at O'Hare on Sunday night, there was no uniformed driver waiting for her at the end of the concourse, holding a neatly lettered sign with her name on it. The trip was over;

Chicago was home. It was back to the taxi line with everyone else.

* * *

A pro got to work an hour before his show, or so believed the man who called himself Cal Kirkland. A good deejay used that hour to check his mail, see what was on the wire, look over the program log, and chew gum. Chewing gum loosened up the tongue muscles, built up the saliva. Not an attractive sight, perhaps, but that was the nice thing about radio; you didn't have to worry about attractive sights. You did have to talk without stuttering and stumbling.

But more Sundays than not, the man who called himself Cal Kirkland didn't even get to work early enough to chew gum in peace. He would squeal into his space in the station parking lot, ripping open a pack of Doublemint as he barreled into the building. Chewing furiously, he would read what memos he could between the reception area and the studio, and then would throw out the rest.

To: Cal
From: George R.
Good news!! WRJR in Chicago just picked up the Cal Kirkland Show. Congrats!! And yes, they're doing it live. So keep that request line open.

* * *

Emily put her bag in the taxi. A jagged line of silver duct tape crisscrossed the back seat, patching the vinyl upholstery. A spray of red plastic lilies grew out of the ashtray. The Sunday real estate section of the *Sun-Times* was in a heap on the floor. This did not happen in limousines. The driver turned to ask her where she was going. He left his radio on. This, too, did not happen in limousines.

Emily gave him the address of the condominium that she rented on the Near North Side, and sat back as the cab pulled out of the airport traffic. The driver said something about the weather; she mumbled an answer. There was a commercial playing on the radio. Emily wasn't listening. She was tired.

Then out of the radio came a bass guitar rocking back and forth in a circle of fifths. A lead guitar twanged in. It was "Eight Miles High."

The driver shot onto the Kennedy. "You want me to change the station?"

"No, this is fine." Emily liked the song. She leaned her head against the back seat. Her hair snagged on the duct tape. When the song ended, the disk jockey came on, telling her that she had indeed been listening to "Eight Miles High" by the Byrds. He went on, talking about how the Beatles had become more intellectual because of the Byrds. Emily thought his voice sounded a little familiar.

"What station is this?" she asked the driver.

He leaned forward, peering at the radio dial. "It looks like RJR."

Emily rarely listened to that station. "Do you know who the deejay is?"

"Nope. But I've been listening to him since I got on. He knows a lot."

The cab changed lanes; traffic wasn't bad. The deejay continued to talk.

. . . and then Roger McGuin went on to . . .

Emily knew that voice, but not from the radio. It wasn't a voice she associated with radio. Now alert, she frowned, trying to remember. A toothpaste commercial came on.

She hated this, not being able to remember something. It was frustrating, that her own memory couldn't be accessed with a simple computer command. She struggled, searching through the half images, the muffled whispers, that filled her mind. Whose voice was this? Then at last it came—the memory.

A boxy reel-to-reel tape deck, bigger than what was being made now, sat on a desk in a high school classroom. A man's slender fingers threaded the tape; they were Mr. Crockett's fingers. And then from the machine came their voices—her voice, Jeff's voice, and Woody's.

Woody. Was it possible? Was this *Woody?*

* * *

Teaching high school was not a job exactly loaded with perks. You did get a better parking space than the students, and the hours were good. Or at least the hours could be good. One thing that perplexed Jeff Grant, instructor of English at Nancy Hanks High in Nancy Hanks, Illinois, was the way he kept turning a job that should have had good hours into one with pretty bad ones. Here it was—Sunday night, and he was at school.

He taught journalism, and the school newspaper was due at the printer on Wednesday. The kids had some layouts they wanted to finish. School policy did not allow students to be in the building unsupervised so here Jeff was, on a Sunday night, sitting at his desk grading papers, half-listening to the radio the kids had playing out in the main room. The one perk of the journalism teacher at Nancy Hanks High was a small office off the rear of the classroom.

At seven o'clock, the radio station embarked on an hour of classic comedy, "The Life of Riley" and "The Great Gildersleeve." At home Jeff would have listened to them, but the kids changed the station. Static alternated with snatches of voice and music as they hunted for something else to listen to.

Jeff finished reading Caitlin Henniker's paper on *The Scarlet Letter.* He glanced back through the comments he had written in the margins, wrote some more at the end of the paper, and signed off with a neat B+. He tossed Caitlin's paper aside, leaned back in his chair and stretched, linking his arms over his head.

Kevin Upham stuck his head into the office. "Mr. Grant, will you come look at this?"

"Sure." Jeff pushed back from the desk. As he came out of the office, a new song came on the radio. The lead guitar had a sitarlike sound and the music was full of all the distortion and fuzz that had been popular when Jeff had himself been a student at Nancy Hanks High School. It was "Eight Miles High." As he looked over the layout of the sports page, his foot was tapping lightly and he was almost whistling.

The layout had two heads bumping, two headlines side-by-side. It was a mistake these kids shouldn't have made, but at least they had found it themselves. As the song ended, Jeff leaned forward to suggest some solutions. He wasn't

listening to the radio; he was thinking about the kids, trying as always to figure out just how much advice to give. The deejay was talking; Jeff suggested moving the baseball stats and adding a picture to the golf-team story.

The deejay went on talking. Kevin didn't think they had a picture of the golf team. Who cared about the golf team? The golf team themselves, Jeff started to answer . . . when he straightened, shocked and thrilled.

* * *

LeeAnn Summer thrust the saucepan under the water faucet. The cold water hissed and splattered against the black crust scorched on the bottom of the pan. "Sometimes I think you do things badly on purpose so that no one will expect you to do them again."

Steve DeLoss ran a hand through his hair. She was wrong. He hated screwing up. He turned toward the radio that sat on the kitchen counter—*her* radio on *her* counter—and switched it on. Billie Holiday was singing. Then he said what he knew LeeAnn was thinking. "This hasn't been working out so great, has it?"

Steve was a violinist, taking time off from music to rest a wrist that was shot full of tendonitis. It had seemed like a great chance for the two of them to spend some time together, but he had been at her place in North Carolina for less than a week, and they weren't exactly having a great time.

"Do you want to leave?" LeeAnn asked. "Where would you go?"

His lease had run out on his apartment in New Haven; his scraps of furniture were in storage. "I don't know. Nancy Hanks, I guess. Mother was really upset I didn't go there in the first place."

He didn't really want to go home, but he didn't want LeeAnn to know. He turned back to the radio, twisting the dial, pausing a few seconds at each frequency.

Steve's ear was trained; a few seconds was plenty of time for him to recognize "Eight Miles High," but he did not have happy memories of high school and he turned the dial, listening for the next station.

* * *

Emily dropped her suitcase inside her apartment door, barely remembering to turn off the burglar alarm. She hurried over to the teak cabinet that held her stereo equipment, jerked it open, and turned on the receiver. Sinking down in front of the speakers, she listened.

Some people, our parents, say they'll always remember where they were when they heard about Pearl Harbor—

It was Woody. She was sure. Hadn't her senior class voted him "Most Unforgettable Character"? He had been their class clown, big and mischievous, with a bold, bright swagger.

—and I guess we're all supposed to remember where we were when we heard about President Kennedy. I don't know—

Of course you know, Emily almost spoke aloud. We were in Miss Katcher's class, learning how to give book reports. Chris Strobel was standing in front of the room, trying to give hers.

—If I wanted to know about somebody, I'd ask him . . . I mean, it's been more than twenty years ago today that the band was taught how to play . . . I'd ask people where they were when they first heard *Sgt. Pepper.*

It was in your basement. I was in your basement. You skipped school that day and drove into Springfield to buy it. Jeff and I went straight to your house after class, and we were all there listening. That's where I was when I first heard *Sgt. Pepper,* with Jeff and you.

* * *

Jeff dropped into his desk chair, overwhelmed by memories of the days when Mr. Crockett had been behind this desk and Jeff had been out in the classroom, editor of the school paper.

Woody . . . his closest friend, his buddy. Loud and bright, quicker, more creative than Jeff, but so disorganized and

undisciplined none of the teachers, except Mr. Crockett, realized it.

Woody . . . in junior high, insisting that someone's big brother drive into Peoria to buy everyone's records. The Peoria radio station tracked sales in local stores for the Top 40 survey. The station in Nancy Hanks didn't. Buy your record in Nancy Hanks, he had always said, and it doesn't count.

Woody . . . the flashing grin, silently mocking all Jeff's Young Overachiever's Accomplishments. *"Chamber of Commerce's Senior of the Year? That's great, especially if you care what the Chamber of Commerce thinks."*

What had been the last thing Woody had said to him? "Give it to them, Mr. Smooth."

It had been at the rehearsal for the graduation ceremonies. Bobby Hutchinson had originally been slated to deliver the commencement address, but after the accident, the faculty had asked Jeff to do it. He had been up almost all night working on his speech.

As their classmates were milling around, waiting for the rehearsal to begin, Jeff and Woody stood off to one side, Jeff trying to act as if none of it mattered, Woody succeeding. Mr. Belcher called to Jeff, needing to tell him where to stand, what to do. Jeff moved off, glancing back over his shoulder, seeing Woody's quick, teasing grin and hearing his voice. "Give it to them, Mr. Smooth."

The next day, the day of the ceremonies, was frantic. Emily was in the hospital, and Jeff spent a couple of hours with her. He didn't see Woody all day. That evening he got in line with the other *G*s without strolling back to where Woody would be standing with the *W*s. He was thinking about Emily. It was strange, to be standing next to Lyle Gingery. For the last four years the alphabet had always put him next to Emily Gordon.

The ceremonies started. Jeff marched in with the class, but when Julie Goodspeed turned into the row of empty folding chairs, he went on, going to the dais to sit with the school board. Emily's dad was on the school board that year, and he nodded at Jeff warmly. Emily's mother was at the hospital with her.

Jeff's black robe billowed as he sat down. He watched the

rest of the class file in. That's when he noticed. For the first time in four years, Marsha Womack was next to Tom Wright. Woody—Dave Woodman—wasn't there.

Jeff remembered nothing of the rest of the ceremony, not giving his speech, not getting his diploma. After it was over, he spoke to Emily's dad, dodged his own parents, and raced over to Woody's house.

Mrs. Woodman was in tears. Woody had left for his summer trip a week early.

Woody had been talking all year about this trip he had planned, hitchhiking alone to San Francisco, then on up to the Canadian Rockies. The venture was not soundly thought out. Hitchhiking was increasingly unsafe; Woody wasn't very good with maps, and he didn't have enough money to get home if something went wrong. Jeff and Emily had claimed to disapprove, but Jeff knew that for his own part, he desperately envied Woody's willingness to take those risks . . . and he couldn't imagine what the summer was going to be like without him.

Woody sent a couple of postcards to his mother that summer, the last one saying he wasn't coming home for college. When Jeff called Mrs. Woodman at Thanksgiving, she said Woody was in Mexico. At Christmas, she didn't know where he was. Then the next summer, she left Nancy Hanks, and Jeff had not heard anything of Woody again.

Not until tonight when he had heard Woody's voice on the radio.

Sixteen years ago, his closest friend had skipped their graduation ceremonies, had left town without a word, had never come back. Sixteen years, and Jeff still didn't have a clue as to why.

* * *

The minute she got to work the next morning, Emily asked her secretary if she had a number for the radio station WRJR.

Ann Marie shoved aside some papers, fumbling for her Rolodex. "If I don't, Jenny will."

But Ann Marie had it, and in a moment Emily was talking to the station's programming department. No, they didn't employ anyone named David Woodman. Last night's show?

That was the Cal Kirkland Show; it was syndicated, originating in Little Rock.

Cal Kirkland? Why wasn't Woody using his own name? Emily asked for information about the station in Little Rock. Then she called Arkansas and asked to speak to this Cal Kirkland.

"I'm sorry," the receptionist in Arkansas said. "Mr. Kirkland does not give interviews."

"Oh, I'm not a reporter. I don't want an interview. I'm an old friend of his."

"Mr. Kirkland doesn't give interviews."

Emily persisted. She had been on the other side of this conversation many times. The agency represented some well-known boxers and some popular figure skaters; between twenty and a hundred requests for client interviews came in each week. "I don't want to interview him, I just want to talk to him."

"He's not at the station at the present time."

"Would it be better if I called him on Sunday?"

"The request line is usually busy."

"I don't want to—" Then Emily realized her mistake. Of course, she didn't sound like an old friend. "It's Woody I want to speak to. Dave Woodman. If you see him—"

The receptionist interrupted. "I'm sorry. We don't have anyone by that name working at the station." With that she hung up.

Emily held the receiver away from her ear, staring at it for a moment. How odd. That receptionist was lying.

But Emily only found it odd, curious. She wasn't frustrated. She knew that if she wanted to find Woody, she could. She was a person of considerable resources and even greater determination.

Not that she looked it. Physically Emily Gordon was cursed with the worst possible frame for a professional woman. She was tiny, small-boned, and delicate. Her looks were "black Irish"—blue eyes framed by dark hair so rich and thick that only the most expensive cut could tame it into a smooth, professional style. She had a cute face with round cheeks and a little nose. It was a magical kind of face, belonging to a child for whom the fairies and elves gave tea parties with white cloths spread across the forest floor.

It was also a face entirely at odds with her personality. She was the least elfin of creatures. Her nature was deeply practical, her manner brisk and decisive. Her judgment was superb, her imagination nonexistent. This made her good at her job. If the Ice Capades contract fell through, you tried the Ice Follies, then the Ice Circus, the Ice Dancers, and on down the line until that client had a job. Emily didn't quit. She was great at not quitting.

But on this Monday morning in April, she sat at her desk, staring at her phone. She wasn't calling directory assistance in Little Rock, asking for Cal Kirkland or Dave Woodman. She wasn't calling the contacts she had on the sports desk of the Little Rock newspaper. She wasn't doing anything. That wasn't like her. *Maybe,* she thought to herself, *maybe it isn't Woody you want to talk to. Maybe it's Jeff.*

* * *

Woody did not have a phone. People needing to talk to him left a message at the lunch counter of the Trailways station. He usually showed up there sometime in the afternoon, and as soon as the girl on counter duty saw him pushing open the glass door, she would draw him a jumbo Coke.

Vicky was on duty on this Monday afternoon. She handed him the Coke, wiped her hands on her apron, and reached for a slip of paper tucked between the little one-serving Campbell's soup cans. "Here. Stan took this for you."

The message was from Stacey, the weekday receptionist at the station. Woody picked up the Coke, grabbed an Almond Joy bar from the candy display, and went to the phone.

"You got a call this morning," Stacey told him.

Woody ripped open the candy bar. He didn't take calls.

He had been a kid in the days when Wolfman Jack was broadcasting from a Mexican station with a signal more powerful than anything allowed in the United States, reaching even up to downstate Illinois. The signal came at night when he would be sitting at his desk doing his homework or lying in bed. In those days the Wolfman was a mystery; no one knew what he looked like, what his real name was. Now everyone knew all about the Wolfman, that he was Bob Smith from Jersey. Woody had preferred not knowing. So

that's what he was as a deejay, a name and a voice, the way the Wolfman had once been. He did no publicity. Let others introduce concerts, serve as celebrity bartenders at fund-raisers, and be Grand Marshal in the local Fourth of July parade. Woody didn't even take phone calls.

"But this wasn't the usual," Stacey continued. "She—the caller—said she was an old friend, and she knew your other name. She asked for Dave Woodman. That's your name, isn't it?"

Woody bit into the candy bar. "Yes."

"I told her that no one by that name worked here."

Woody took another bite. "I appreciate that." He tried to sound gracious, but he wasn't very chummy with the weekday staff.

"And Mark wants to see you."

Woody sighed. "Not very chummy" was a little too mild for his relationship with the station's programming director. "I suppose it's about the request line."

The station had a toll-free request line. When a request came in, the deejay would tape the call, go to the music library, and get the song. Then sometime later, he would play back the taped request so that the caller got to hear his or her own voice as well as the song. But Woody repeated the dedications—*this is for Barbie from Jack*—in his own voice. He had told Mark that all the extra technology wasn't right for an oldies show.

The truth of the matter was that Woody didn't tape the calls because there were no calls. The first thing he did on entering the studio Sunday night was punch all the buttons on the phone, tying up the lines. That was one of the advantages of working Sunday nights. No one knew what you did.

Woody used his own records. The station had a good library, but most everything was on CDs or rerecorded on cartridges that were popped into the bank of tape players. The sound on CDs was great, but too often the old tunes had been remixed, the tracks sweetened and rebalanced. He trusted the vinyl from his own collection.

Of course, using his own records meant he couldn't do requests, and the guys in suits expected requests. So he made them up. *From Valerie to Brian; Cassie's dedicating*

this one to Michael; this one's from Kathy, and she says you will know who you are . . .

* * *

Emily's days were full. Her job was to manage the agency's clients' money, supervise their investments, structure their retirement plans, and in some cases even issue them monthly allowances. Every day there were stocks to sell, developers to phone, and prospecti to read.

By seven that Monday the office had grown quiet. Emily's last task each day was to write out a list for the next day, listing the items in the order she would do them, estimating how much time each one would take. After she finished she took her green linen jacket off the back of the chair and put it on. As she was settling the collar, she drifted over to the windows. Her view was of the Sears Tower, the tallest building in the world, a cold monolith of black glass and black steel.

She supposed that the notion of doing something about high school, of somehow managing to relive those days and get them right, was a fairly common fantasy among otherwise sane adults. But unlike most of these adults, Emily had been given such a chance; she had taken it . . . and it had been a disaster.

Her ten-year high school reunion had not come at a very good time in her life. It was a few years before she had gotten into sports management. She had her M.B.A. and was a trust officer at one of the big Chicago banks. At first she had done well there. She was naturally perseverant, and she had an instinct about investments, a sixth sense that immediately told her, told her long before she had run the numbers, when something wasn't right.

If the bank had left her managing portfolios, everything would have been fine. But true to the Peter Principle, she had been promoted and expected to share this skill with people coming straight out of school.

She couldn't. "I think you're wasting your time," she would say when someone was researching a stock offering, but she couldn't say why she thought that; she couldn't explain how this new recruit could know that too. So the new recruits thought her rigid and unsupportive, even

though she wasn't, even though she was desperately trying to help them. For the first time in her life, Emily felt as if she were failing.

So she came to her high school reunion with something to prove, especially as she knew that however carefully she described her job, three-quarters of her classmates would hear "bank" and think that she was a teller.

But there was one person who would be able to understand her job: her old boyfriend Jeff Grant.

Emily had lived in Nancy Hanks as long as she could remember. Her real father had died of polio when she was a baby, but by the time she was two her mother had married Jim Gordon, who adopted Emily and moved them both to Nancy Hanks. Jeff moved to town the summer before eighth grade; his father had gotten a job managing the Fireside Restaurant.

The Grants lived on a different side of town so Jeff went to the other junior high, but it wasn't long before Emily started hearing about him. *"Over at Douglas, there's a boy as smart as you."* After a while, Emily knew that because he was intelligent, he would be part of her life at high school. She had never met him; she never spoke about him; but she was

In those days, Nancy Hanks High was rigidly tracked. The bright kids took one track of classes, the ordinary ones took another, and the boneheads were stuck in a third. So from the first day of high school, Emily and Jeff were in almost all the same classes, thrown together by the alphabet and by the quality of their minds. They hardly spoke at first, but they were conscious of each other, aware of the other's presence, alive to the possibilities. *If anyone in this room is my equal, it is you.*

When their relationship blossomed, it had been intensely loyal, but not simple. They were both energetic and goal oriented. Neither one could join a club without ending up running it. By the end of sophomore year, they had committed themselves to the school newspaper. This was what they would spend their time on. Mr. Crockett, the paper's faculty adviser, was the teacher to whom they would give their allegiance. Senior year, Jeff had been the paper's editor and Emily its business manager.

Both of them were competitive, and as much as Emily loved Jeff, she also resented him. She felt as if she were always in his shadow, always one step behind him. She was smart, the smartest girl in their class, but in a school like theirs the smartest boy was always smarter than the smartest girl.

So it was hardly surprising that, although at sixteen they couldn't imagine life without one another, although they planned to marry, planned to be grandparents together, their relationship had not survived their college years.

Ten years later, at the time of the reunion, Emily felt like once again Jeff was winning. He had stayed in journalism and was working as an investigative reporter on a paper in St. Louis. He had done a series on the deplorable quality of the undergraduate education courses that were supposed to train teachers. The series had been so well done that the findings were summarized in *Newsweek* next to Jeff's picture. Emily knew that she was a long way from having her picture in *Newsweek*.

So if she had something to prove to everyone at the reunion, the stakes were the highest with Jeff Grant.

Little happened during the reunion itself. Before she even picked up the name tag with her senior picture pasted on it, her eye found him instinctively, a slender man with a quick smile and warm coloring, golden glints in his brown eyes and coppery highlights in his thick hair.

He greeted her warmly, touching her arm, saying how well she looked, apparently confident enough himself to be able to be generous. She liked that and soon found that it was easy to fall back into the ways of being a couple. When they moved about the room talking to people, they moved together. They sat together at dinner, danced together afterward.

"Apparently I don't understand your job," he said during their first slow dance together. "I thought you invested money for dead people and rich children. Everyone else seems to think you count change."

"If the tellers ever went on strike," she answered, "I might have to count change."

"Do you like the job?" he asked. "A publisher is trying to

get me to turn some articles I wrote into a book, but I don't dare for fear I'd make some money and then I'd have to figure out what to do with it."

"I love investment work," Emily answered. "Of course, trusts are pretty conservative. It would be fun to get into something where you can take greater risks, but this is a good place to start."

The bank might have been a good place to start, but Emily was well out of the starting gate, and now she hated her job . . . or at least felt like her job hated her. Suddenly she wished she could tell him how she really felt about it, how awful it was to know that people were talking about her. The people who worked for her were complaining; her supervisors were perplexed, unable to understand why she wasn't doing better. If only Jeff would take her over to a quiet corner of the room and let her talk, the glints in his dark eyes softening as he listened. He would understand; he would care.

But she couldn't do it; she couldn't tell him. His picture had been in *Newsweek;* a publisher wanted him to write a book. He really was as successful as she appeared to be. She couldn't admit her failure to him.

So instead she traced her finger along the lapel of his blazer, following a line of stitching up and around his shoulder. They were dancing, and after a moment, his hand moved from its light perch on the middle of her back to rest more securely on her waist.

As midnight approached, they followed their classmates out to the parking lot, waving good-bye across the cars, the pickups, and the vans. Jeff then spoke. "It's still early. Are you tired or shall we go somewhere and talk?"

Emily should have suggested that they go to her parents' house, that they make coffee, sit in the family room, and talk. Her parents might still be up; they would be happy to see Jeff. They had always liked him. But that was too safe. Emily was failing in her job; playing it safe wasn't helping her back in Chicago. Perhaps she needed to start taking more risks.

"The key to the lake house is still in the same place," she said. "Shall we go there?"

Jeff agreed and offered to drive. Once they were outside town, Emily rested her hand on his leg, and in a moment, he put his hand on top of hers, holding it there.

It was late June, and dense honeysuckle spilled over the wire fences, its trumpet-shaped, yellowy blossoms sending a spicy fragrance through the car's open windows as Jeff slowed to turn into the lane. His headlights brushed white against the trunks of the poplar trees. He stopped at the little cottage and let the engine die, the headlights fade. Then the crack of the closing car doors echoed across the lake.

The key was where it always was, hung on a nail beneath the left window box. Emily opened the heavy oak door. Moonlight filtered through the loosely woven curtains, leaving the room a soft gray. She laid the key on a little pine table and turned to Jeff.

They had never made love in high school. They had thought about it, talked about it, had come very, very close, but virginity had felt important to Emily in those days. She had later lost hers in college. She assumed that he had too.

Neither one of them spoke. In the moon's pale light, she could see him raise his hand, lifting it first to her face, and then as if to say that this was high school no longer, to the buttons of her blouse. The cool silk slipped over her shoulders and fell to the floor with a whisper, a drift of pale blue on the rough textures of the braided rug. Only then did Jeff kiss her.

It was nearing dawn when they drove back into town, drawn close by the ease of spent passion. They both felt desperate, determined: *we have to be together; this is our chance.*

Emily could not leave her job, but he could. No one at his newspaper would be surprised if he asked for a leave of absence; turning his series on education courses into a book was a logical thing to do. So he arranged to come to Chicago, bringing with him the bright promise that they had both felt, a destiny, a certainty that they did indeed belong together.

Emily had never lived with anyone, and she was surprised by how difficult it was. Jeff would be in the shower when she wanted to do her hair. He threw out leftovers she would have saved. He was left-handed and put the detergent on the wrong side of the kitchen sink.

They were too much alike. They both liked being in control; they both liked making decisions. They couldn't even grocery shop together. They would get in line, and Jeff might think of something else to get so he would dash off to get it. Emily was no more patient than he, and she resented being left to wait when dashing off was much more fun. Sometimes they would both dash off; their abandoned cart would be pushed out of line, and they would have to start all over.

There were moments when Emily despaired, when it all seemed like a terrible mistake. On hot Sunday afternoons, she would sit up in bed, drawing the tangled white sheet around her naked body, knowing that they were in bed only because they could hardly stand each other out of it. She would wonder how she had let anyone intrude in her life like this, changing all her little systems, wanting to do things his own way.

She would push such thoughts aside. How could such petty problems destroy this grand passion that had lasted across a decade?

At work, she had been assigned to a court-appointed trust, a project so messy it had taken most of August to straighten out. When she finally filed a report with the judge on a Friday late in the month, she had come home early, which was why she was there when the phone rang.

Even though he worked in the apartment most of the day, Jeff did not answer her phone. Despite the fact that Emily was twenty-eight with a good income and her own apartment, she did not want to explain Jeff's presence to her parents. So each morning she set the answering machine. Jeff would listen as the caller left a message; if the call was for him, he would pick up the phone.

The arrangement worked because he didn't get many calls. So Emily was surprised when, on that Friday afternoon, a female voice, soft, almost childlike, asked if this was the right number for Jeff Grant.

They were in the kitchen, a narrow, windowless room, fixing themselves something cold to drink. Emily passed Jeff the phone. Tucking it under his chin, he moved to the refrigerator and opened the freezer compartment to get ice cubes.

"Jeff Grant," he said, assuming it to be a business call.

But as soon as the other person spoke, he let the freezer door swing shut. He turned away from Emily, moving as far out of the kitchen as the phone cord would allow.

Emily cut a lemon; the thin yellow slices fell into a little stack on the wooden cutting board. As Jeff went on talking, speaking in tones so low she could not hear him, she got out an ice cube tray and snapped the cubes out. The tray was blue plastic. Jeff had bought it. Until he moved in, she had used old metal ones, the kind that you have to run water over before you can lift the lever that cracks the ice loose. That was one change he had made in her life that she hadn't quarreled with.

Leaning against the counter, she sipped her iced tea until he hung up. "Who was that?" she asked.

He ran his hand across the top of the phone as if wanting to be sure it was hung up. "I need to talk to you."

"Fine. Let's go out in the living room." She handed him his glass.

He didn't take it. "That was Britta. I have to go back to St. Louis."

Emily knew who Britta was. She was an artist Jeff had been involved with for the last few years. It hadn't been a very satisfactory relationship, he had said. She was immature and dependent. He had spoken so emphatically about her shortcomings that Emily assumed Britta was calling with bad news about someone else—the old "this is awkward, but I thought you'd like to know" phone call.

"What's wrong?" she asked him, concerned. "I hope it's not too bad."

"With Britta, who knows? She's given a bunch of her slides to someone purporting to be an agent, and she can't get them back. He gave her some money, and she's not sure what kind of rights she sold, if any."

"Wait a minute." Emily set her glass down on the counter with a sharp click. "You're going back to St. Louis for her? I thought you said that was over."

"It is, but as I said, she—"

"So she's in a mess. She needs a good lawyer. Why call you?"

"I suppose that's what we will do, but someone needs to find the lawyer."

Emily did not like the way that "we" sounded. "But why should that someone be you? It's not like you're married or anything."

"No"—and to give him credit, he was trying to explain—"but at a minimum, there's money involved, and my name is still on her checking account."

"You shared a checking account?" Emily stared at him. She couldn't imagine that anything short of marriage (and maybe not even marriage) would induce her to let someone else write checks on her account. "Am I missing something here?" She could hear her voice, how cold and sarcastic it sounded. "Like maybe you were doing a little more than going to a movie together on Friday night?"

He answered quietly. "We were living together."

"Living together?" Emily was not naive. She had never doubted that Jeff's involvement with Britta was sexual. They must have spent nights and weekends together, perhaps at his place, perhaps at hers. But their actually living together, one apartment, one checking account, that had never occurred to Emily.

Anger surged through her. "So let me get this straight." She wanted this to be very clear. He was the one who had been a bad sport; he was the one who hadn't played fair. "You were living with her, and you didn't tell me?"

"It was over. I'd already moved out." Now his voice was crisp in response to her anger.

"Then why are you going back?"

"She needs me."

So he had left, and she was hurt and angry.

The next she heard of him was a month later. Her mother called. Jeff had gotten married. The rejection was now complete.

"I don't think they had a wedding," Glenda Gordon chattered. "But I do want to send a gift. He was always such a nice boy. Do you know this Britta of his? What would she like?"

Glenda's standard wedding gift was a full-size kitchen mixer. Although Britta sounded like a person who was

hopeless in a kitchen, Jeff enjoyed cooking. There was a good chance that he would like a Mixmaster. "Get them a silver Revere bowl," Emily said firmly.

"Oh, how nice," Glenda trilled. "So many young people these days don't like formal things. Shall we sign your name to the card too?"

"By all means."

Eighteen months later, she had heard about him again, not from her mother, but from the *New York Times* best-seller list. His book was published with surprising success. Columnists read it and blamed everything that was currently wrong with society on teacher training. Several governors appointed task forces. When the paperback came out, Jeff went on tour to promote it.

He came to Chicago to do the local talk shows, and Emily watched him on TV. He told funny stories about the education classes he had enrolled in, about the student teaching he had ended up doing. He was fluent and poised, his flashing smile lighting up the television screen. As she watched him, so quick and confident, she found herself wishing that some of the people she now called friends knew that this man had been in love with her twice.

What woman doesn't have at least one such memory? A relationship that, while certainly over, does not quite feel finished. A woman can have been married for nine years, she can have two wonderful children, and yet there will be a memory of this boy. She knows that if she were to see him again, now that she is a woman and he a man, there would be for a moment a feeling in the pit of her stomach that he was the important one, not this husband of nine years.

But for most women that moment never comes. You always expect that someday you will see your old love, and maybe you never accept that it won't happen until the day you read his obituary. Not so for Emily Gordon. She knew that she was going to see Jeff Grant again.

He had moved back to Nancy Hanks three years ago. She didn't know when he had gotten divorced, but he had returned to town a single man. His father had had a stroke, and as stormy as his relationship with him had always been, Jeff had come home to help his mother, first with the care of his father and then after his father died with settling the

estate, selling the house, moving her to an apartment. His father had lived long enough that Jeff had taken a job at the high school. One unintended result of his research on education courses was that he had teaching credentials.

Emily had been out of the country on business when Mr. Grant had died. Her parents had gone to the funeral, and she knew that they would have said all the right things for her. *Emily will be so sorry that she couldn't be here.*

The truth was that Emily had been deeply relieved to have an excuse for not attending the funeral. She was only sorry a few months later. The funeral would have been a perfect time to see Jeff again. He would have been too busy, too concerned about his mother, too occupied with his own grief or—as Emily suspected—with his guilt over not feeling much grief, for their meeting to have anything more than a funeral's ordinary awkwardness. You couldn't expect a man at his father's funeral to explain why he had gone off and married someone else.

But the funeral had been two years ago, and surprisingly Jeff was still in Nancy Hanks, serving, like their much-loved Mr. Crockett, as faculty adviser to the student paper. So far Emily had managed to avoid seeing him. When she came home for holidays, he was always traveling. Her parents mentioned him. "We saw Jeff Grant the other day. He said you should call him."

"Give him my best," Emily would reply, but she never went to see him.

Of course, it had to happen someday. She would be in the grocery store, trying to figure out her mother's list, or she would be at the park, or at a party or a movie, and she would look up and there he would be. It had to happen. She thought about it every time she went home, every single time. *Maybe this will be it, maybe this will be the time I see him again.*

Professional success and other relationships had gone a long way to easing the hurt and rejection she had felt over Jeff's leaving her. But still it would not be easy to see him again.

Now, on this Monday evening in April, six years after he had left her, sixteen years after high school, she realized how sick she was of having this hang over her head. She was sick

of dreading their first encounter. She was not a passive person; she rarely sat back and waited for things to happen; she acted, she initiated. Except for this. She had been waiting for this.

But no longer. It was time to get Jeff over with, time to take care of him, cross him off her list.

She picked up the phone to call directory assistance. The operator gave her his number. She started to dial, then hung the phone back up. Talking to him on the phone would only get her halfway there. She was going home to face him.

two

Having decided to go home and see Jeff, Emily was the sort of person who would have liked to pick up her purse, unlock her car, drive for four hours, and ring his doorbell. But she did not have the sort of life that permitted such impulsive acts. She was too busy. In fact, if seeing Jeff had been her only reason for driving the four hours to Nancy Hanks, she would have wondered if she was being self-indulgent. But her younger half sister was getting married in the fall. Even though the wedding was five months away, Emily's mother had been nagging her to come home and be fitted for her maid-of-honor dress. Between old boyfriends and new gowns, Emily decided that she could spare the time to go downstate.

Being a sports agent was no nine-to-five job, and to free up a weekend required two weeks of unrelenting work. Emily was at the office before seven each morning, she stayed late each night, she worked all day Saturday the weekend before, and she was even at the office on Sunday night. She brought a radio so she could listen to Woody's show, but while she was listening, she also worked.

We've got a request here. For "Sunshine of Your Love," and it's from Skip to Leslie. Skip turned sixteen this week, and now

he and Leslie can finally go out without his father having to drive, without Dad being in the front seat. That's not so great, you know, having Dad in the front seat, you can't even talk to each other; you have to talk to Dad. "How do you like school, Leslie, dear?" "I like it a lot, Mr. Skip's Dad." But now Skip's sixteen, so Leslie can sit right next to him in the middle of his dad's Olds 98, and he can drive with his arm around her, and she can work the radio. So Skip and Leslie, this one is for you.

Emily put down the prospectus she was reading. She had to smile. That was exactly how it had been when she had first started to date Jeff, when his father had driven them to their first movie. Of course, that hadn't lasted long. Mr. Grant had his restaurant, and he didn't like leaving it on Saturday night to drive two kids to the movies. After a while, Emily's parents had offered to drive, which had only been a little better.

How lovely it had been when Jeff had turned sixteen, and they could have the car. She would sit, just as Woody had described, in the middle of the front seat. How nice it was for this Skip and Leslie, whoever they might be, that they could now have the car and be alone. Some things didn't change.

* * *

But Jeff Grant knew which things had changed. He knew right away that this dedication made no sense. He was acquainted with a great many sixteen-year-olds, and yes, they were still thrilled to turn sixteen, and they did still dedicate songs to each other, but not "Sunshine of Your Love." Most of them had never heard of Cream. And in these days of seat belts and bucket seats, a girl would have to squirm around the gear shift to sit in the middle of the front seat. Woody was making this dedication up.

Not that Jeff was surprised. Part of what had made Woody's company so exhilarating was his very casual relationship with the truth. His stories to account for arriving at class five minutes late had been so elaborate, often involving five or six kinds of animals, that even Mrs. Ferrars, the most rigid of teachers, would have to choke back a laugh and wave him to his seat unreprimanded. Jeff, who was never tardy,

had envied Woody, not only for his effortless inventiveness, but for his disdain of the school's power over him. Woody wouldn't have cared if Mrs. Ferrars had sent him to the principal's office; he wouldn't have minded a week's worth of detention, not if his story had made the class laugh.

Now a teacher himself, Jeff laid his red pen alongside a stack of ungraded papers and ran his hand along the edge of his desk, a plank supported by two file cabinets. It would be nice to talk to Woody again.

Maybe he made up those dedications because his station didn't have a request line; Woody had never announced a number for one. But that was okay; Jeff was not considering calling him. Woody would hate it. He had liked surprising others, but he hadn't much liked being surprised himself.

Jeff leaned back in his chair, getting a box of good writing paper off the bricks-and-board bookcases that ran perpendicular to his desk. He uncapped his fountain pen and, as "Sunshine of Your Love" spilled out of the radio, started to write, "Dear Woody, . . ."

* * *

Nancy Hanks, Illinois, while not a metropolis, was no little one-stoplight town either. Set along the Illinois River in the rich glacial soil of the Corn Belt, it had the best shopping between Peoria and Springfield. A lot of the farmers and people from still smaller towns came into Nancy Hanks on Saturdays. Even though the highlight of the town's cultural life was the high school basketball team, there was more to do on a Saturday night than drive around the parking lot of the Dairy Queen. The town had movie theaters, a bowling alley, and a miniature golf course, a municipal swimming pool, and a country club, two fabric stores, a halfway-decent jewelry store, and even a bridal shop.

Jim and Glenda Gordon lived in a sprawling white frame house on the edge of town. Jim had bought the house after he had married Glenda and adopted Emily. He and Glenda had then had two children of their own, Kelly, now a senior at the University of Illinois, busy planning her wedding, and Wyatt, who at twenty-nine had three children of his own and

was doing well as a seed company representative in Davenport over on the Illinois-Iowa border.

On Friday afternoon, two weeks after her resolve to confront Jeff Grant, Emily turned into the driveway of her parents' house. Her mother must have been listening for her car; before Emily had gotten her suitcase out of the trunk, Glenda was hurrying down the steps and crossing the driveway.

Glenda Gordon was a tiny, blond woman, brisk and energetic, with high standards about people's behavior and appearance. Her philosophy was that the solution to all problems was to keep busy. When Emily had been in a car accident and had required a considerable amount of transfused blood, Glenda, instead of having nightmares for weeks as any normal mother would have, had reorganized the county blood bank. Her distracted air came from the fact that she was always doing six such things at once.

Emily knew that she herself had acquired this tendency to act rather than reflect from her mother, but she still thought Glenda rather unworldly, incapable of making important distinctions. Recently Glenda had decided the county needed a hospice and she was working hard to set one up. But if one of her daughters gained ten pounds, she would have thrown herself into a dieting crusade with the same amount of energy she was devoting to the hospice.

"What a beautiful suit," Glenda exclaimed as she stepped back from their embrace. "Turn around. Let me look at it. It's lovely."

Emily turned around. It was indeed a beautiful suit, made of a coarse-spun lemon silk. The skirt was slim, and the jacket had an off-center placket with a mandarin collar. The blouse was a paler yellow silk, matching the lining of the jacket.

"I do like the way they've done the back seams," Glenda continued. "But was it comfortable to drive down in? Why didn't you go home and change?"

Emily didn't answer. Nothing in Nancy Hanks was more than ten minutes from anything else, but for Emily to have gone home from her office in the Loop to change clothes would have added another hour to the two-hundred-mile trip. Her mother didn't understand that.

"When are we scheduled for the fittings?" Emily asked once they were inside the house. "I'd like to look Jeff Grant up sometime this weekend." She tried to sound as if it didn't matter whether or not she found him.

"What a nice idea!" Glenda opened the refrigerator and, without asking Emily, took out the iced tea. "Whenever we see him, he says he wishes we didn't keep you so busy every time you come home." She handed Emily a glass of tea and then looked at her watch. "It's nearly four. He'll probably still be at the high school. Why don't you run right over now?"

Running right over now sounded a little too precipitous even to the efficient Emily. "So we're not going to the bridal shop until tomorrow?"

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" Glenda pursed her lips, vexed at herself. "I thought I did. Marge Graham called at lunch. U.P.S. didn't deliver the dresses this morning. But they'll definitely be here on Monday. Can you stay until Monday afternoon?"

Until Monday afternoon? Emily stared at her mother. There was no way she could stay until Monday afternoon. She had three meetings scheduled for Monday morning.

Not for the first time did she feel that her mother had no idea what her life was like, that her job involved a lot more than free tickets to the Olympics and paid trips to the World Figure Skating Championships.

Like many women of her generation, Glenda Gordon had never had a paying job, and Emily attributed much of what irritated her about her mother to this. Knowing you have to pay the rent each month changed a person. Glenda was busy; Emily tried hard to respect that. If Glenda wanted to spend a Tuesday afternoon shopping for spring clothes, it might take her several weeks to schedule the outing, but she would not have to make the hard trade-offs that Emily would. *If I shop on Tuesday, then at the end of the month, my clients may have made less money.*

Being responsible for someone else's assets was a trust that Emily viewed as nearly sacred. But she respected anyone in a job that involved responsibility for the unforgiving truth of the bottom line. Such jobs had pressures that Emily felt her mother could never understand.

During a normal week, Emily hardly had time to pick up the dry cleaning or buy stockings. To free up this weekend had involved late night after late night at work, and now she was going to have to come back again later in the month to try on this dress. Why hadn't her mother called her? Why hadn't she spared her this wasted trip?

Well, maybe Glenda hadn't called because she hadn't known in time, Emily reminded herself. She did have a car phone, and while perhaps Glenda could have tried to track her down somewhere along Interstate 80 and told her to turn around, that was not the sort of thing you could really expect from a loving mother who had already done her weekend grocery shopping. As crazy as Glenda sometimes made Emily, she did not doubt for an instant that her mother loved her.

So Emily said nothing. She obediently drank her tea and, brushing aside her mother's suggestion that she change clothes, she got back into her BMW. Steering it along the route she had driven so often in the secondhand Mustang her parents had given her for her sixteenth birthday, she headed toward Nancy Hanks High School.

* * *

Nancy Hanks High School had been built at a time when people had wanted public buildings to be imposing. Its heavy stone construction was supposed to look like a massive Georgian mansion, but had ended up having a very fortresslike quality. This original structure had been softened by redbrick additions that were joined to the old building by corridors of glass blocks. The glass had trapped the heat, making those hallways gentle, pleasant places in the winter and long ovens in September and June.

Emily's locker had been right next to one of the glass corridors, the very last locker in the new part of the building. Jeff's had been the first in the old part. During the opening week of school, when Emily had been so eager, so desperate, to talk to him, she had cursed the fluke of their class roster. If there had been one more name in the *B*s or one fewer in the *F*s, Gordon and Grant would have had their lockers side by side.

Their first real conversation, just the two of them talking,

had been in the glass-bricked hall separating their lockers. Emily no longer remembered what they had talked about; she only remembered how hot she had been, how she could feel the sweat moistening her back, pooling between her breasts. Jeff must have been equally hot, but neither one of them had been able to say, "Hey, let's get out of this heat-trap." The moment had felt too fragile. If she had moved, if he had shifted his books from one arm to the other, if either had taken more than the most shallow of breaths, everything would have surely collapsed. That corridor had been a bridge between the separate worlds of boy and girl, and no amount of pain or danger would have driven either one of them off it.

It should be funny, Emily thought as she stared at that corridor through the windshield of her silver BMW. It should be funny to remember how shy and vulnerable they had been, how young. But it wasn't. High school memories were hard for her, not so much painful as bewildering, difficult not because of what they contained but because of what they did not.

The accident had happened sixteen years ago on a June night, the Sunday before Senior Week, the week of the Senior Assembly, the student-faculty Olympics, and the prom. The radio station had promised a week of clear skies and light winds, but on Sunday rain clouds had darkened the evening early.

Mr. Crockett rented a little house a couple miles outside town, and on that evening, as on many Sunday evenings over the past four years, he had opened his door to his three best students, Woody, Emily, and Jeff.

They had a pleasant hour, Woody draped across the easy chair, Emily and Jeff sitting side by side on the sofa. They talked about the year behind them, the week before them, remembering back to the time the principal had suspended Jeff for one of his editorials, wondering ahead to what Bobby Hutchinson would say in his commencement speech. Bobby Hutchinson was a jock; he had been center on the basketball team and had been voted the senior class's "Most Popular Boy." He wasn't in their crowd and Woody was having a good time making fun of him.

It was a fine way to spend a Sunday evening, but neither

Emily nor Jeff wanted to stay late. There were still finals to study for and term papers to finish. Emily also needed to help her mother with the hand-stitching on her prom dress. But Woody had driven them there. Jeff and Emily couldn't leave until he was ready, and he did not seem interested in leaving.

Jeff was trying to signal to him when there was a knock on the door. Jeff and Emily exchanged a quick, surprised glance. They never thought of Mr. Crockett as having friends, as being anything beyond what they knew him as, a teacher they idolized. They watched curiously as he went to the door.

But it was another student, Bobby Hutchinson, there to deliver the final draft of his commencement speech. Mr. Crockett was chairman of the faculty committee that had selected him to speak.

Although Bobby Hutchinson's grades weren't nearly as good as Jeff's, Bobby had the same sort of leadership abilities. Emily sometimes felt like the two of them were princes of neighboring kingdoms. Each of them ran half the school, Bobby ruling over the jocks and all their school-spirit activities; Jeff, through his position on the paper, controlling everything else. It was as if they had signed a nonagression pact, swearing not to be enemies, but without any inclination to be friends.

Only once had they invaded each other's territory, and they had handled it with a smoothness that Emily, now an experienced negotiator, still admired.

It had been in late spring of junior year. She had been standing with Jeff at his locker when Bobby came up. They had all exchanged greetings. Then, leaning against the warm glass wall, Bobby had spoken. "You know, when my dad graduated from here, he gave the commencement speech."

Although many schools have the class valedictorian speak at the graduation ceremony, Nancy Hanks High held a competition to select their speaker. Students auditioned in front of a faculty committee who made the choice.

"But," Bobby had continued, speaking to Jeff, "if you try out, no one else has a chance."

That had been true. Even though the competition was

nearly a year away, Emily had felt sure the result was inevitable. Who else but Jeff would have anything to say?

"On the other hand," Bobby had gone on, "if I run for class president, you wouldn't have a chance."

That had also been true. Bobby's kingdom had a larger population than Jeff's.

Jeff had pulled a book off the upper shelf of his locker. "Your dad wants you to give the speech?"

Emily had known from the tight, blank look on Jeff's face that he was thinking about his own father, whom he very nearly hated.

"He hasn't said anything, but I think he would."

"Then I hope you win."

Without anything more being said, the deal had been made. A week later Jeff had announced his candidacy for senior class president, and Bobby had told his friends on the basketball team that he was going to vote for Jeff. A year later, Bobby had signed up to audition for the commencement address, and Jeff hadn't. Instead, Jeff had asked Mr. Crockett to help Bobby with his speech.

That Sunday evening before Senior Week, Mr. Crockett took the speech from Bobby with the usual quiet smile in his dark eyes. Bobby hesitated, then turned to go.

Jeff stirred. "Could you give Emily and me a lift back to town? We've got finals to study for."

"And he doesn't?" Bobby said, jerking his thumb at Woody, whose car Bobby must have seen outside.

The answer to that was no. Woody didn't study for finals, and he wrote his term papers directly on the typewriter.

Bobby said he was happy to give them a ride. "But it is raining. You'll get wet on the way to the car."

He had his father's Impala. Jeff and Emily darted through the rain to the car. Jeff climbed into the back seat and Emily slid into the front, letting the door slam behind her. This was in the days before the seat belt laws.

The rain was heavy, slashing down, leaving the county road dark and slick. Bobby's headlights cut only a short swath through the darkness. Ahead of his car they made out a pair of faint red taillights, steadily growing closer as Bobby accelerated.

The road into town curved just before the DeLoss family place. It was a long, sweeping curve, but the road was narrow, and on a night like that, the shoulders were mud. The Impala shot around the arc. The tires lost traction, the car spun, whirling off the road, spinning again, then crunching head-on into an elm. Emily crashed through the windshield; Jeff's body came hurling over the front seat, forcing Bobby against the door, and then down and under the steering wheel.

Jeff's shoulder hit the horn; it blared for an instant, a raucous spurt of noise followed by silence. The quiet of the night was broken only by the sound of the rain as it washed away Emily's blood.

Their classmate Steve DeLoss heard the accident and called the ambulance. For Emily, it came in time. There was blood in the county blood bank; more was sent for from Springfield and Peoria. Emily missed the end of the school year, spending all of Senior Week in the tiled hospital room, missing the Senior Assembly, the prom, and graduation. But she had known she was going to be all right.

Jeff had only bruised a few ribs. The hospital sent him home on Monday morning, and he was back in school on Tuesday. The faculty asked him to deliver the commencement speech in Bobby's place, and as Emily was still in the hospital, he took Bobby's girlfriend to the prom.

There had been nothing the little Nancy Hanks hospital could do for Bobby. He was alive, awake, but he kept asking his mother where his legs were, why he couldn't feel them.

Emily intended to finish her coursework over the summer, but it had taken her until the middle of August just to complete Mr. Crockett's English paper. In the end that was the only one she finished. The University of Chicago, whose college she would be attending in September, said they didn't care whether or not she had a high school diploma.

Not having one had never made a bit of difference to Emily professionally, but missing all the year-end festivities had mattered emotionally. Not going to the prom, not dancing on the gym floor at the end of Senior Assembly, not marching down the aisle in a black gown with a gold-tasseled cord around her neck marking her as one of the top

ten students, not having all her friends out to the lake house for a graduation party afterward—over the years these things had mattered. It was as if she had been cheated, spending four years building toward a climax that had never happened. Something was missing, something was unresolved.

So now, as she carefully locked her car and walked toward the building that she had not entered for sixteen years, not since the Friday before her Senior Week, she wondered if missing the final days of school had been one reason she had slept with Jeff the night of the reunion. For most people the reunion had been a pleasant time to see old friends, but she had needed to have something important happen; she had been trying to capture what a shattered windshield had robbed her of.

The staircase leading up to the journalism room was deserted and Emily could hear her heels click against the treads. But when she pushed open the wire-meshed glass fire doors that separated the stairwell from the hallway, she heard the sounds students make in a classroom after school hours—teasing voices, laughter, and, of course, a radio.

The door to the journalism room was open, and Emily paused, looking in. There were ten, perhaps fifteen, kids; most of them were boys, and they were working on the paper. Some were clustered around a light board, working on a layout; others were at the window, looking at slides through a viewer; still others were at the desks writing headlines. The long table in the back of the room was piled with papers, books, and layout boards. Taped to the walls above the chalkboard were front pages from different newspapers.

Emily closed her eyes; the memories were silvery sharp. This was how she and Jeff and Woody had spent so many afternoons, surrounded by narrow strips of white paper trimmed off typeset copy. The air had been pollinated with chalk dust, and they had always played the radio, not only to hear the music, but to assert themselves, to say "It's after class now. You can't control us quite as much." Woody would keep turning it up louder and louder until Mr. Crockett would raise his eyebrows and say, "I don't mind if

you get yourself in trouble, but pretty soon it will be me they'll be after."

But these were now Jeff's students. What did he say when they played the radio too loud?

Emily forced herself out of her reverie and listened to the kids talk, waiting for a good moment to break in. One story was lost; someone said Spencer had it last. Spencer denied ever having anything to do with it. The sports editor didn't have all his headlines. "Thirty-two spaces?" his reporter protested. "I can't stretch this out to thirty-two spaces. I'd need a fourteen-letter word for *win.*"

Emily read the sports page every day. "Are victorious," she suggested politely.

The kids all stopped what they were doing, turned, and stared at her. Nothing, she thought ruefully, would have once brought on more instant panic in the principal's office than such sudden silence in the journalism room.

So she dispelled it by asking, "Is Jeff Grant here?"

"Sure." A pretty blond girl slipped off her perch on the low bookcase that ran beneath the windows. She was in jeans and a knit shirt, the kind of clothes Emily and her friends had only been allowed to wear on the annual Dress-down Day, although even on those days if Emily had worn a pair of jeans as tight as this girl's, the school nurse would have called her mother to come get her with a raincoat to cover her between the nurse's office and the parking lot.

The girl went to the little back room that had once been Mr. Crockett's office. "Mr. Grant, there's someone to see you."

"I'll be right out," came the answer, and although it had been six years since she had seen him last, Emily knew the voice.

A figure appeared. The shadows of the doorway were dark, and Emily could hardly see him, but she knew that when he crossed the threshold, moving into the bright spaces that the windows threw across the desks and floor, the sun would bleach the hair on his forearms to a reddish gold.

What funny things you remember about a person.

She waited for him to notice her. He was eating an apple, and he was lifting it to his mouth when he froze, his hand stopping in midair, motionless, stunned.

"Hello, Jeff," she said, glad that she was the first one to speak.

"Emily." He stepped forward, coming into the light.

He did not seem to have changed. He was dressed as he had been as a reporter, in khakis and a blue oxford cloth shirt, a tie loose at his neck. His face still had its foxlike shape with clean, high cheekbones and a narrowing angle at his jaw. His hair, still the color of dark sherry, was longer than it had been six years ago. At this length, the curl grew in, rumpling the hair that brushed against his shirt collar. This was how long he had worn his hair in high school. He had calculated the length carefully back then, wearing it short enough to keep the principal happy, long enough to enrage his father.

The silence broke.

"Mr. Grant, Mr. Grant, we can't find that story anywhere."

"Where's the enlarger, Mr. Grant? Did it need fixing?"

"Todd thinks these photos aren't cropped tightly enough, but I—"

"Doesn't this border looked forced? We could—"

These were Jeff's students, and they were all talking to him. He was the center toward which they directed all their tingling adolescent energy. He was in charge here; he was their leader.

He held up his hand. "Cope, guys. You can deal with it." He tossed his apple into the round metal trash can over by the teacher's desk. It bounced against the rim with a ping and thudded to the bottom. He pulled some keys from his pocket. "The enlarger's in the trunk of my car." He tossed the keys to one kid. "The story's bound to be here somewhere. Keep looking. We're not having it typeset again."

Then he came over to Emily, gesturing to the door. "Let's go down to the lounge. It's quieter there." His hand brushed the air at her elbow, not quite touching her. She went out of the classroom and heard Jeff shut the door behind them.

The hall seemed very quiet, a long stretch of nile green

linoleum, interrupted by irregular patches of light green tiles where repairs had been made. Banks of lockers alternated with the classroom doors. Emily looked at that hallway carefully before letting herself glance sidelong at Jeff.

One thing about him had changed: his walk. She couldn't really remember how he had walked before, but she was sure his movements had not been like this. His gait was now lithe, with a broad-shouldered spring to it, hinting of a quickness and agility more characteristic of a well-paid second baseman than of a reporter or a teacher.

Emily again wanted to be the first to speak. "I take it the paper's about to go to press."

"It was due yesterday," he answered.

"So you're late?" That wasn't like him. Woody had always done everything at the last minute, but she and Jeff had been too compulsive to ever be late with anything.

"I'm not late," he answered. "They are."

Two girls came out of the rest room. They were talking to one another, but when they caught sight of Jeff and Emily, they stopped. One flushed and then the other spoke. "Hello, Mr. Grant."

"Hi, girls," he answered. "This is late for you two, isn't it?"

The girl who had spoken rolled her eyes in exaggerated distress. "We have this killer test on Monday."

Jeff laughed; apparently the test was his.

The other girl spoke. "Is it going to be hard?"

"Impossible," he answered. "Absolutely impossible."

The first girl was by now interested in Emily's suit, but the second was looking up at Jeff. She was blushing again, and her eyes were sparkling. Emily could see she had a crush on Jeff.

Emily herself had had a crush on Mr. Crockett. It was embarrassing to think about now, but she must have been like this girl, smiling, blushing, transparent. She had thought Mr. Crockett so wonderful, what he thought of her mattered so, just exactly the way this girl now clearly felt about Jeff.

As Emily looked at him now, standing in this green-tiled hallway, talking to these pretty students, she suddenly realized why she was here.

To show him. To show him that she was doing great.

She had not liked being in his shadow during high school, and then ten years later he had left her, going back to a woman he had loved more than he had loved her. Emily had liked that even less.

But look at her now. True, she wasn't married with pretty children to dress up in matching sailor suits and Christopher Robin coats. But she had a great job, she made tons and tons of money, she drove an expensive car, and she was wearing the most sensational suit that had ever crossed the city limits of this town.

And what about him? Their senior class had voted him "Most Likely to Succeed," and he was teaching high school.

After a moment, he said good-bye to the girls. When they were out of earshot, he turned back to Emily, apologizing. "I didn't mean to keep you waiting."

"One of those girls has a crush on you."

"If you want to be technical about it, I think they both do."

"What do you do about it?"

"Nothing," he answered. "It goes away soon enough, and in the meantime they work very hard."

Yes, she had worked very hard for Mr. Crockett.

"Do you like teaching?" she asked.

He shrugged. "It comes easily enough."

What didn't for him? He had always been good at everything.

"But what about the cafeteria duty and faculty meetings? Didn't Mr. Crockett hate cafeteria duty?"

"I think he did, but I don't really mind it. I arrange to do mine on the day the paper comes out. Then I can talk to the kids, find out what they think about it."

They turned the corner, moving toward the closed door of the teachers' lounge. "You know, I've never been in here," she said.

The teachers' lounge had always been forbidden to students. Jeff, Emily, and Woody had, in their dealings with Mr. Crockett, crossed the line that usually separated teacher from student. They would drop by his house on Friday evenings and Sunday afternoons; he would tell them how

much he hated faculty meetings and cafeteria duty. Nonetheless, they had never been in the teachers' lounge.

"I know," Jeff said, and there seemed to be a smile in his voice. Emily wished that she could look over her shoulder to be sure, but they had stopped at the door, and he was standing too close. "I wasn't exactly a kid when I started teaching, but the first time I came in here, I kept waiting for Mrs. Ferrars to throw me out." He reached around her to open the door. "Step inside and behold the mysteries so long concealed."

Emily went in . . . and coughed.

The air in the small room was stale with the rasping smell of tobacco smoke, still lingering long after the smokers had left. Lipstick-stained cigarette butts filled the ashtrays that were balanced on the wide arms of the brown vinyl sofas. On the metal-rimmed table beneath the closed window were a crumpled pack of Benson and Hedges and a book of matches.

"They were just hiding the fact that they smoked?" Emily asked.

"As far as I can tell. I've yet to see anything more interesting happen in here. Not that I come in here much. I'd rather be around students than around smoke."

Emily shook her head. "I always assumed that something special must be going on in here."

"Isn't that the way it always is with the great mysteries of life? You find out the answer and realize it was more fun not knowing."

Emily had to agree with him. In fact, she reflected, it was quite a shame that they both hadn't realized that at the time of their ten-year reunion.

"Would you like some coffee?" he asked. "I suppose it was made sometime after we graduated although I can't be sure. I could make some fresh. It would shock everyone, but for you, I would do it."

Emily stiffened. Was he flirting with her? Well, if he could do it, so could she. "Oh, I wouldn't want you to get in trouble on my account, and anyway, I didn't graduate, you did. Remember?"

"Okay." He put down the coffeepot. "So I hear you have a new job."

He couldn't do it. He couldn't flirt with her. He had been the one to blink first. She had won.

But he seemed so comfortable and confident, not at all like a man made skittish. He had crossed over to the window and was leaning back against the table, his arms folded lightly. He was looking at her with a pleasant, polite expression as if he didn't have a clue that this was anything more than your usual after-school chat.

But he had more than a clue; he probably had the whole goddamn map. That was one of the things Emily had not always liked about him.

"It's not really new," she answered and proceeded to tell him about her job, launching into her standard patter, the brief explanation, the funny little stories. This was the routine she went through on first dates; at least on those increasingly rare occasions when one's date showed an interest in anything but himself.

And then, suddenly this felt like a first date, as if the need to impress him came not out of vengeance for past hurt, but from uncertainty, from the excitement of possibilities, a hope for the future.

Which was crazy. Her only concern about the future was to make sure that if, when they were old and gray, she saw him in a grocery store, she wouldn't have to hide in the frozen food bin.

Of course, if that were truly all that was at stake here, then one of them would be saying, "Hey, let's get out of this smoke-trap."

She changed the subject. "Guess who I heard on the radio."

"If you really want me to guess," he answered, "I'd say Woody."

Oh. Emily sat down in one of the brown vinyl chairs. So he already knew. Why was she here if he already knew?

"You heard his show?" That was a stupid thing to say; obviously he had.

"I've been listening for almost a month now."

"It's pretty exciting, isn't it? To hear him after all this time." She was gushing; it was not like her to gush. Since she wasn't trying to impress him, she didn't need to sound intelligent, but it would be nice to sound sane. She took a

breath. "Do you have any idea why he isn't using his own name?" They had discussed his disappearance so often in the past that there was no point in mentioning it again.

Jeff shook his head. "I wondered that myself. Maybe he likes being a human Magical Mystery Tour. Or maybe in some other radio job, he signed away the rights to his name."

"That would have been a stupid thing to do."

"Yes, but can you imagine Woody reading the fine print on a contract?"

Jeff had a point there. Woody was not exactly a detail person. Emily wasn't sure he would even read the boldface type at the top of a contract. "I tried to call him, but I didn't have any luck. His station made it pretty clear that Cal Kirkland doesn't take calls and no one will admit that anyone named Dave Woodman works there."

"I tried to get in touch with him too," Jeff said. "I wrote him earlier this week. I thought he might want to know about the dinner for Bobby Hutchinson."

"Bobby Hutchinson? Who's putting on a dinner for him?"

"It's a fund-raiser for a statewide wheelchair Olympics-type thing," Jeff explained. "I guess Bobby's still quite a jock. He's very involved in programs for disabled athletes, and he's the guest speaker at this banquet."

The accident that had caused Emily to miss her senior prom had left Bobby unable to walk. "It's a fund-raiser?" she asked. "Do you have the details? I'd like to send a check."

"Sure. Although it's a shame you can't come. It's in three weeks. Steve DeLoss is coming, at least that's what his mother said."

Steve DeLoss had been the one to call the ambulance the night of the accident. So he would be there, Jeff would be there, Bobby would be there, everyone, except Mr. Crockett and Woody, and they hadn't really been involved in the accident. If Steve and Jeff were going, Emily supposed that she ought to go too. Sending a check might be enough in Chicago; in Nancy Hanks you needed to show up.

But to come back in three weeks, to free up another whole weekend . . . Emily got that sinking, boxed-in feeling she

had so often when she came back home, that feeling of her choices being taken away from her, of having to do things she didn't want to do.

Oh, well, she had to come back for that bridesmaid's dress. She might as well combine the trips.

"Of course, I'll come. If you don't have your ticket yet, don't bother." She stood up briskly. At least she would do this in her own way. "My agency will buy a table. I'll call Steve too. That way we can all sit together."

"That's not necessary. We can all sit together even if we buy our own tickets."

"Oh, don't worry about it." He might have been class president and editor of the paper, but this was what she did for a living. "We do this sort of thing all the time. Disabled athletes—it's great PR for a sports management agency to support something like that. I'm glad I heard about it in time. I would have hated to miss it."

"Yes, that would have been too bad."

That was all he said, and Emily guessed that it meant he was agreeing to her plan. She wasn't sure what to say. Since she was already standing up, she supposed that she might as well leave. "Now I need to run. My parents must have something planned for this evening." She didn't have a clue whether they did or not.

"I'm sure they do. I'll walk you out to your car. Did you park in the front?"

Emily nodded, and they retraced the route she had taken no more than fifteen minutes before. Jeff didn't say anything, and now she was sorry she had ended the conversation upstairs so abruptly. That was the sort of mistake she made all the time, ending something too quickly rather than risk having it go on too long. Even if the teachers' lounge had been full of smoke, it would be nice if they were still upstairs talking. She didn't want to start another romance with him; she didn't want this meeting to end up with the two of them out at her parents' lake house; she just wanted to go on talking to him for a while.

"Where is Mr. Crockett?" she asked. "Do you know?" Mr. Crockett had always traveled during the long summer vacation, but the September after their senior year he had not come back to Nancy Hanks.

Jeff shook his head. "No, I don't. I asked around when I came back, but nobody, none of the other teachers, seems to know where he went."

"I wonder why he left."

"He probably couldn't face running the paper without the Gordon Construction ad," Jeff answered.

Emily's father, Jim Gordon, was the county's largest general contractor and although Gordon Construction had little enough need to advertise and certainly no reason on earth to do so in a high school paper, the company took a full-page ad in the *Nancy Hanks High Herald*, every single issue, month in, month out, for the four years Emily had been on the staff.

They had reached her car now, and as Emily pulled out her keys, she glanced at Jeff, wondering if he was impressed by what she drove. But if he even noticed that it was a BMW, he gave no sign.

Which served her right. The agency leased both it and its utterly unnecessary cellular phone for her. That was not much more of an achievement than if she had married some rich doctor who had bought it for her.

Jeff held the door as she got in, then closed it lightly. She turned on the ignition, lowered the window, and he leaned forward. "The night of Bobby's dinner," he asked, "do you want me to come pick you up?"

"Oh, no." Her answer was swift. Sitting at home listening for the sound of his car in the driveway—that would be too much like a date. He was going to be *her* guest. "I have no idea what strange activities my family will have scheduled beforehand. I'd better drive myself."

"Then I'll see you there," he said and stepped away from the car.

* * *

The door to the journalism room was still closed. Apparently not much time had passed since Jeff had shut it behind Emily and himself. But if someone had told him ten years had elapsed since then, he would not have been completely surprised.

He opened the door.

"Mr. Grant, Mr. Grant, will you take a look at these headlines?"

"No," Jeff said. When the kids missed a deadline they forfeited the right to his help, and they knew it. The student editors would catch obscenities and lapses in grammar. People who wanted help from him with elegance, brevity, and interest needed to get their work done on time. "Did you find Mike's story?"

They had. It had been tucked between Kimberly Golff's algebra-trig homework and the copy Brian Orb was making of that homework. Without saying anything, Jeff let them know what he thought of that, then went over to the light board where Kevin and Doug were working on the paper's final page.

Doing layouts was always a lot harder than it looked, but Kevin and Doug were seniors and they were doing pretty well. Jeff watched them silently, one hand in his pocket. He felt tired. He had run seven miles that morning; that might have been too much.

At least he hoped that it was the running that had been too much. It certainly might have been seeing Emily Gordon. He hadn't much liked being surprised like that, but he had to give her credit. That was not the sort of thing most women would have had the nerve to do.

"Mr. Grant?"

Jeff turned to meet Val Churchill's earnest gaze.

"That lady . . . was she a friend of yours?"

Val was a pretty blond and the only one of his journalism students conventional enough not to be embarrassed at that question . . . although all the kids were undoubtedly interested.

And it was an interesting question. Was Emily Gordon a friend of his? An honest answer might take a long, long time.

"She was," he hedged. "As a matter of fact, she used to be business manager of the *Herald.*"

Kevin looked up from his Exacto-knife. "That was Emily Gordon?"

Jeff was surprised—not by their being interested in Emily, but by their knowing her name. It had been sixteen years since he, Emily, and Woody had run the paper, and it

wasn't as if this Illinois high school enshrined the memory of its business managers. Some small portion of today's student body might know Bobby Hutchinson's name, but not Emily Gordon's.

So the newspaper staff had been back in the archives reading the issues of the paper from sixteen years ago. Jeff supposed that such a thing was only natural. If the kids' curiosity about his life had any limit, he had yet to find it. And there was that plaque on the wall reminding them that for one year—his and Emily's year—the *Nancy Hanks High Herald* had been worthy of national recognition. He looked back down at the light board. There sure weren't going to be any national prizes for this issue.

Spencer asked if Emily was still in journalism.

No, Jeff answered, but perhaps her experiences on the paper were helping her in the public relations aspect of her current job.

The kids wanted to know about her job, which must have sounded pretty glamorous to them, small-town teenagers that they were. No, that was unfair; Emily's job would sound glamorous to most people. In fact, several times during his conversation with her, Jeff had had to remind himself sternly about the lessons he had learned during the publicity tour he had done to promote his book—just because something looks glamorous doesn't mean that it isn't every bit as boring as the next thing. Surely being behind the wheel of a BMW wasn't enough to make your four hundredth trip across Interstate 80 interesting.

Nonetheless, he did his best to answer his students' questions about Emily's job. They secretly—very secretly—envied jocks, and it wouldn't hurt them to know that the truly successful athletes ended up relying on people like themselves.

But it was strange to be talking about Emily as if she were nothing more than someone he'd once taken to a few Friday night movies. He now realized that six years ago when he had gone up to Chicago to live with her, he had needed his relationship with her to be perfect. He hadn't been married to Britta. By the time he had come to Chicago he was no longer living with her, but he still felt as if he were betraying

her. Only the most intense passion, the most complete and loving understanding, could justify leaving her.

He had always told himself that he had loved Britta for her talent; she was an extremely gifted illustrator. He, who was good at everything, admired people who were great at one thing. But now he wondered what the long involvement with her said about himself, what sort of weird needs of his had been fulfilled by her dependency.

All that mattered to Britta was being able to draw. In every other aspect of life, she kept herself childlike, refusing to accept any responsibility. She would live on gingersnaps and tea unless he shopped and cooked decent meals. She wouldn't keep regular hours; if she felt like drawing, she drew. She didn't take the most basic care of herself.

It wasn't right to leave a person just because she had a cold all the time, but sometimes Jeff felt as if that was why he had left.

Nonetheless he had gone back to her, not so much because he had loved her, but because he wasn't used to failure, because he couldn't persuade himself that he had tried everything.

He knew things would not work if he went on sacrificing himself and his work to her. That had been what had sent him off to Chicago in the first place. So when he returned to St. Louis, he had decided what he would and wouldn't do. He would live with her if she wanted, they could even marry, but he would no longer share a checking account with her. She could bounce as many checks as she liked, but he would never again go into an art supply store, begging for time to cover one of them. Nor would he do her busywork for her, cutting mat boards, making slides. He had his book to finish, his own career to think about.

At the time, he thought that it was a workable compromise, a solution to their problems. Now he realized that he had been trying to turn Britta into Emily.

Of course, Britta hadn't understood. She complained to her friends in low, bewildered laments: *he must not love me . . . he doesn't understand . . . only until I finish this series . . .*

Everyone she spoke to was on her side. Her talent was

unique; she deserved support. It would be tragic if she couldn't work. She wasn't like other women, not with this gift of hers. Jeff should understand, be more accommodating, more flexible.

He knew what they were saying. People used to gossip about his father, and Jeff had always been determined that no one would ever be able to talk about him like that, be able to find fault with him.

In those last weeks he had spent with Britta, people were saying very bad things indeed about him, that he was being unfair, that he didn't understand the creative temperament. It was the one thing he had always dreaded, but he endured it, having finally discovered that there was one thing worse than not having people respect you and that was not respecting yourself. He had gone on, quietly insisting that Britta act like an adult, feeling like his life had been taken over by the dull, blank ache of missing Emily.

Finally Britta, to whom sex was nothing more than a way to bind men to her so that they would take care of her while she worked, moved in with a gallery owner, a man who had left his wife and children to care for her.

The next few years Jeff had devoted to his book and the heady flush of its success; after that, his father's stroke had brought him back to Nancy Hanks. During his first weeks of teaching, he had thought about Emily continually, and he found that he missed her all over again. He couldn't go into the new wing without glancing at the first locker beyond the glass-brick corridor. He would see a student there, and he would want to take him aside. "You have Emily Gordon's locker. Do you know what that means? Do you know how special it is?"

He kept expecting to see her; it was as if she were always just around the corner, just inside the next classroom. He thought about calling her. He had changed; maybe she had. They could get some counseling, figure out where they had gone wrong. Surely this time they could do it right.

But he hadn't called. He had used her, and he did not believe himself entitled to a second chance. It hurt, but time helped, and eventually the first locker beyond the glass corridor became just another locker.

He could go a month, two months, without thinking of her, and then he would see two sophomores, falling in love for the first time. They would be so nervous, yet so happy, so very, very happy, moving about in a daze of dancing rapture, the light glowing in their faces. He would see them, and he would think of Emily.

three

Emily's bedroom in her parents' house was still a girl's room, decorated in the apple green gingham she had chosen twenty years before. On her bulletin board were the mementos she had tacked up during high school, her Pep Club letter, the ribbons off all the corsages Jeff had given her, a picture of the two of them in an antique car that had been taken at the county fair, a copy of the editorial that had gotten him suspended from school, the issue of the paper that had won a national award.

Emily had already taken off her suit and was replacing it with the jeans that she kept at home. Like many single business women, Emily spent a great deal of money on her professional wardrobe and almost nothing on casual clothing. On a normal day she went straight from a silk shirtwaist into her bathrobe. When she had a chance to dress comfortably, she had to wear relics from college days. The sweatshirt that she was pulling on now was adorned with faded maroon lettering spelling out her allegiance to the University of Chicago.

A quick knock on her bedroom door was followed by the bright eyes and curly head of her half sister. "Are you decent?" Kelly asked. "Alex is here. Can we come in?"

Kelly Gordon was as small as Emily and their mother, but

she did not have the same delicate build. She was an athlete, a compact bundle of well-muscled energy. She loved to move. Emily, whose exercise consisted of walking to and from the bus stop, often envied her sister the clean definition of her arms and legs.

But that envy did not keep Emily from being crazy about her sister. Kelly was a bright, breezy person, a joy to be around. Straightforward and uncomplicated, she was in Emily's eyes thoroughly deserving of the happiness she seemed likely to have with her easygoing fiancé, Alex Kornheiser.

Kelly danced over to Emily's bed and picked up the yellow suit. "This *is* great. Mother was telling me about it. And about the dresses not being here. Isn't that a shame? But we've got loads of time. I mean, only Mother would want to have them finished this early. Oh, well, it's good to see you. Mother says you went and saw Jeff this afternoon."

Emily blinked at the sudden change in subject. She greeted Kelly's fiancé, then answered the question about Jeff. "Yes, I hadn't seen him in a long time."

"That's what he keeps saying. I don't get it. Why haven't you seen him? You come home often enough."

"I know." Emily sat down on her bed to put on the Reeboks she had once bought in hopes of getting more exercise. "But he always seems to be traveling during the various holidays, and—wait a minute, when did you talk to him? I didn't think you knew him." Kelly had only been five when Emily and Jeff had left for college.

"Didn't you know?" Kelly asked. "We trained for the marathon together last summer."

"You and Jeff?" Emily stopped tying her shoe. "For the marathon?" It had been no surprise when Kelly had run the Chicago marathon, but Jeff? He had never been an athlete.

His father had wanted him to be one. As much as Jeff's high school career should have pleased any parent, his father hadn't approved. Athletes were the ones people paid attention to, Mr. Grant had said; that's where you learn to be a leader, out on the basketball court, not in some grubby newspaper office. But Mr. Grant had managed a restaurant; he was never home afternoons and weekends. All he did to

promote Jeff's athletic career was to yell at him for studying too much.

But if what Kelly was saying was true, Jeff had started running. That did explain what she had noticed about his walk this afternoon. All her clients were athletes, and even the most massive of them had grace, a lightness and ease to their movements. It was a physical presence that Jeff now had too.

"Why didn't you tell me he was in the marathon?" Emily asked her sister. "I was there, watching you. I could have thrown water on him or something."

"He didn't run. He hurt his knee a couple weeks before. But he says he hopes to try again this year. I hope he does. He's great to train with."

"What Kelly likes the most about training with him," Alex told Emily, "is all the embarrassing things he tells her about you."

Emily turned sharply, then relaxed. Alex was joking. Jeff would never, not ever, tell her sister about the summer they had spent together.

"I did ask him why the two of you broke up," Kelly said.

"We were eighteen, nineteen." Emily was certain that it was their first breakup Jeff would have described to Kelly. "And we had been dating since we were fourteen. Isn't that enough of a reason?"

"No," answered Kelly who had been dating Alex since she was sixteen. "He said it was because he couldn't stand the thought that you were going to a better school than he was."

"He said that? That was nice of him."

Most of the college-bound seniors at Nancy Hanks High went either to the University of Illinois or Illinois State. But throughout high school, Mr. Crockett had talked about his alma mater, the University of Chicago, telling stories about the vaulted Gothic buildings, about the superb libraries and the Nobel prizewinners until the whole newspaper staff wanted to go there. But unlike the state-supported schools, Chicago was a private institution and it was expensive. That had not been a problem for the well-to-do Gordons, but Jeff's father managed a restaurant that he did not own.

The day before the deadline for applying to Chicago, Jeff had told Emily that he was not mailing his application.

She had hardly been able to believe it. They had been planning this for years, the two of them going off to the city together. How could he not apply?

"There's no point," he had said. "It costs too much."

"But there're scholarships. Mr. Crockett's been saying that all along, that Chicago admits on merit, and then they award the scholarships strictly on need."

"Maybe, but their idea of 'need' is going to be a whole lot different from my dad's. They're going to expect some family contribution, and he can't see the point of it, not when I can get a free ride at Urbana."

"Why not send in the application anyway?" Emily had felt desperate. He was ruining all their plans. "Something might come up."

"No. I need to get used to it. I'm going to Urbana."

So in the end, Emily had gone off to Chicago alone. If the truth were told, she wasn't very happy there. Many of the other students were from the East Coast, and they were not like Emily. They had been to plays on Broadway, and their parents were divorced. They had gone to better high schools, and their minds were focused and intense, undistracted by clothes and dates. They hadn't missed their senior proms; their schools hadn't even held them.

But when she came home for Thanksgiving of her freshman year, she did not tell the truth any more than she had nine years later at the reunion. She had gloated, flaunting the fact that she was reading Thucydides and Themistocles while Jeff's reading lists were all "relevant," featuring Ken Kesey and William Burroughs. "Oh, you're so lucky," she had said, not meaning a word of it. "That must be so much easier than what we have to do."

That was, she supposed now, understandable behavior in an eighteen-year-old still self-conscious about the angry red scars on her arms. But what about a thirty-four-year-old who had driven for four hours in a not very comfortable suit for the sole purpose of reminding a man that his weekly take-home pay would not have bought that suit. Was this mature behavior? And what should such a woman do to redeem herself next time she saw that man?

Emily was saved from having to answer either question by her mother's voice, calling to say that her father was home.

Tying up the laces on her shoes, she followed Kelly and Alex downstairs.

"Hello, sweetheart." Jim Gordon put his arm around Emily and kissed her. "It's good to have you here."

Emily hugged him back. "It's good to be here."

Jim Gordon, sole owner of Gordon Construction, was a lean, wiry man who, in his late fifties, was still crawling around half-built houses to inspect the workmanship. It was from him that Kelly and Emily's half brother, Wyatt, had inherited their athletic abilities.

"Your mother was just telling me about the dresses," Jim said. "That's a shame. Can you stay until Monday or will you have to haul yourself down here again?"

As the owner of a business, constantly aware of the bottom line, Emily's father had a much clearer notion of her professional life than her mother did. "Actually," she answered, directing her remarks to her mother as well, "Jeff said there's a fund-raiser that Bobby Hutchinson is speaking at. If it's okay, I'll come back then."

"Oh, are you going to that?" Kelly asked. "We all wanted to, but it's pretty expensive."

Emily doubted that. Perhaps by Kelly's undergraduate standards the tickets might be dear, but Hemphill and Associates, who had bought tables at some punishing fund-raisers, would probably think of themselves as getting off lightly. "You really want to come?" she asked Kelly. "I'm going to have the agency buy a table, and I'd love it if you and a bunch of your friends would sit there. I didn't know how I was going to fill it. Jeff will come and Steve DeLoss if I can find him." Emily stopped, realizing that once again Kelly seemed to have more contact with one of her former classmates than she did herself. "Why do you want to come? Do you know Bobby?"

Kelly nodded. "He lives in Urbana and runs these programs for physically challenged athletes, and he bullies us phys ed majors into volunteering. He says that physical education resumes need all the help they can get."

That was probably true. "Does he do this full time? Is that his job?"

"Lord, no." Kelly laughed. "Can you imagine raising a

family on what you'd get paid for *that?* No, he's got an insurance business."

Emily wondered how she would respond to a wheelchair-bound insurance agent. She would probably end up with a lot of insurance. "He has a family?"

"Yeah. Wendy—that's his wife, she's great, we love her—she has a boy by her first marriage, and now she and Bob have two adorable little girls. They're so cute; the little one looks just like him. What are their names, Alex? Courtney and Brittany, something like that."

Emily made herself smile at her sister and say something else about the banquet. Then she turned to get out the silverware to start setting the table for dinner.

Even Bobby Hutchinson, paralyzed, in a wheelchair, had children. Was she the only one who didn't?

No, she reminded herself. Jeff didn't. And Steve DeLoss, he wouldn't. He was probably still a virgin.

* * *

Steve DeLoss leaned back against the wall of a phone booth in Ohio, listening to LeeAnn's clear voice over the long-distance wire. He had been drifting around since leaving her apartment and hadn't made it back to Illinois. He planned to return to Nancy Hanks soon and was trying to persuade LeeAnn to come with him.

"I don't understand," she was saying, "why do you want me to come to this? A fund-raising banquet for disabled athletes? Can't you send a check?"

"These people are important to me. Jeff Grant's going to be there. I told you about him, and Emily Gordon and Woody—Dave Woodman—I wouldn't be surprised if they came too. I'd like you to meet them."

"But, Steve, that was high school. How can people from high school still be important to you?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's because they're the only people I know who aren't musicians."

Steve had gone straight from high school to Juilliard. At Nancy Hanks High, everyone had ignored him. Even when his mother forced the principal to have him play a violin solo at a pep assembly, when he had been standing up in

front of the entire student body, the only person on the floor of the gym, they had ignored him. He had been the class wean, the music geek, the squirrel.

At Juilliard, being ignored would have been a blessing. Steve, used to being the only serious musician that he knew, could not cope with how competitive everyone was, especially when it got nasty with music being stolen, practice rooms being locked, audition times being switched. Life had gotten better when he started performing with symphonies, but still he only knew musicians, and they were as narrow and uninteresting as he was.

LeeAnn sighed. "I don't suppose you want me there so you can impress them with what a gorgeous girlfriend you have?"

She wasn't bragging; what she said was true. Even though she looked nothing like the women on TV, LeeAnn was beautiful, a fact that Steve appreciated more than she gave him credit for. "Would you come if that was true?"

"Not in a minute."

"Then you'll come?"

"Yes, but I'm not sleeping on the sofa bed in your mother's sewing room. Get me a hotel . . . if this godforsaken little town of yours has a hotel."

"There's not a hotel, but we've got a perfectly respectable Holiday Inn."

"My, my. Then your hometown is not nearly as godforsaken as mine."

* * *

The Gordon family had nearly finished dinner. Glenda was offering seconds on dessert when Kelly slapped her forehead and jumped up from the table. "What an idiot I am. How could I have forgotten?" She grabbed Emily by the hand, pulling her out of her chair. "Come see all my stuff. We just picked it up today. I can't believe I didn't show it to you before dinner. That gorgeous suit of yours drove everything else from my mind."

"That's the thing about you, Kelly," her fiancé said pleasantly, passing his plate to Glenda for more pie. "There's so little in your mind, it doesn't take much to drive it all away."

Kelly stuck her tongue out at him and dragged Emily upstairs.

Kelly's "stuff" was the first place setting of her china and silver patterns, which were now sitting unpacked on the top of her dresser. For all her carefree manner, Kelly liked pretty things; her china was Royal Doulton with a border sprigged in deep blue-green and her flatware was a scroll-and-shell Reed and Barton design.

Emily traced a finger around the silver rim of the china. "This is really lovely."

"It is terrific, isn't it?" Kelly picked up a teaspoon in delight. "I love it all. And won't your Waterford look great?"

Shortly after Kelly and Alex had gotten engaged, Emily had been sent to Europe for the World Figure Skating Championships. She had been so happy to hear about Kelly and Alex that during a layover at the Shannon Airport in Ireland, she had made an idiot of herself in the duty-free shop, buying Waterford crystal for them. Emily owned no Waterford herself. Her wineglasses were a set of boxed cheapies. Nor did she have china or sterling. She was not married.

Besides her patterns, Kelly was registering with the jewelry store for other gifts. She showed Emily a copy of her registry, listing the silver holloware that their father's business associates would buy for her: a coffee service, salt and pepper shakers, platters, and bowls. Then there were the practical gifts that their mother's friends would buy—a food processor, a four-slice toaster, a coffeepot that ground its own beans, pottery casseroles, a down comforter.

Emily did have her own toaster.

"Wait until you see this." Kelly was coming out of her closet, carrying a worn cardboard box. "This is what Aunt Tilda is giving me."

Aunt Tilda was their childless great-aunt whom Emily had adored as a child . . . although she did not know what she had truly loved, Aunt Tilda herself or the little clusters of violets on the wallpaper in her tiny house. Now that she saw Tilda through an adult's eyes, she could understand why Emily's Grandma Postle called her seventy-six-year-old sister a spoiled brat.

Kelly set the box down on her bed, opened it, and folded

back the tissue paper, revealing a tablecloth so intricately cross-stitched that the fabric was stiff.

Emily touched it. It was exquisite. "Did Aunt Tilda make this?"

Kelly nodded. "And there's a bedspread too." She laid the tablecloth aside and pulled from the box a mass of ivory crocheted lace.

"This is a bedspread? A whole bedspread?" Emily would have been happy to have a little scrap for insets on a blouse.

"Isn't it gorgeous?" Kelly shook it open. "It's crazy to give something like this to me since the first thing Alex is going to do when we get back from the honeymoon is buy a puppy, and if I know him, he'll let it sleep on the bed. But I love it—the bedspread, I mean."

"I should think so." Emily could not keep her hands off it.

"And Mother says these aren't nearly as nice as yours."

"As *mine?*" Emily looked up, startled. "I have one of these? What are you talking about?"

"I guess a long time ago Aunt Tilda decided she would give all the girls in the family tablecloths and bedspreads for wedding presents. She made yours first because you're the oldest cousin. It was a while ago, and her eyesight was a lot better then—Mother says that's why yours are nicer."

Emily was stunned. "She's already made some for me?"

"She made them during your senior year in high school."

"High school? What did she think, that I was going to get married at eighteen?"

"Who knows what she thought? Maybe she wanted you to marry Jeff."

Kelly was looking as sly as she was able. "You keep that up," Emily told her firmly, "and I'll charge you for those banquet tickets."

Kelly apologized.

But still, as she and her sister folded the bedspread and tablecloth, Emily couldn't help thinking about another bedspread, another tablecloth, more intricate than these, stored away in the cedar closet of Aunt Tilda's spare bedroom for the last sixteen years. They were hers, yet redeemable only upon marriage.

How odd it was, here Kelly was thirteen years younger

than Emily, and in some ways her life seemed further along. She had china, crystal, and silver; soon she would have a husband. Her life was set. She and Alex were coming back to Nancy Hanks to live; she was going to open an exercise studio, he would be taking a job with Gordon Construction. Any day now a crew from the company would be breaking ground for their house. It was as if Kelly's pretty engagement ring was a passport to adulthood that Emily did not have.

That night Emily woke sometime before dawn and watched the moonlight filter through the apple green gingham curtains. *Maybe you won't ever marry, won't ever have a house, children. Maybe you're going to end up alone.*

* * *

Mail for the radio station's on-air personalities was put in boxes across from the bulletin board. Woody only looked at his when he came in to do his Sunday night show, but even that seemed like too often. He could not understand the things people sent through the mail. Why would anyone send a deejay a picture of her left breast? Why just the left one? He unfolded the note. *"Dear Cal, If you want to see the other—"*

He dropped everything—note, envelope, and left breast—into the trash. He ripped open another envelope.

Stan, the music director, reached past Woody for the contents of his mail slot. "What have you got there?"

"I haven't a clue." Woody handed Stan the sheet of paper he had taken from the envelope.

Stan looked at it for a moment, then turned it upside-down. "If I had to guess, I'd say that a gentleman removed his trousers and sat on a Xerox machine."

Woody grimaced and fanned through the rest of his mail, dropping all the handwritten ones in the trash unopened. He also threw out everything that looked like an ad or a promotion. That left an envelope with an address typed on a manual typewriter. Who still used a manual? He opened the letter.

Dear Woody,

Your show's great, you must know that, but if you

don't play "Dock of the Bay" very soon, I shall call the F.C.C. . . .

"Dock of the Bay"? Woody's eyes shot down to the signature. *Jeff.* Names popped out from the typed paragraphs: Steve DeLoss, Bobby Hutchinson.

-Bobby Hutchinson.

He didn't want to hear about Jeff or Steve or Bobby, especially not Bobby. He wasn't going to read this letter; nothing in his contract said he had to read his mail. He crumpled up the letter and hurled it into the trash.

* * *

Emily was usually relieved to leave Nancy Hanks after a weekend with her family. No one at home seemed to have any respect for privacy. Emily had been interrupted twice during her shower Sunday morning: her mother wanted to know if she wanted an egg for breakfast; her sister needed to brush her teeth. Kelly had started to chat through her mouthful of toothpaste and Emily had had to stick her shampoo-foamed head out around the shower curtain in order to hear her.

Nonetheless the quiet of her Chicago apartment was not very inviting. She never liked her apartment on Sunday nights. During the week she was too busy to mind that she had almost no pictures on the white walls, that her tabletops and shelves had no interesting objects collected on interesting journeys. But on Sunday nights, especially after a weekend with her family, she was very conscious of how unhomey the place where she lived was.

At least Woody had given her a reason for being there on Sunday nights—to listen to his show. His familiar voice was not the same as having a lover or friends sharing the evening with her, but it was something.

We've got another dedication tonight from Skip to Leslie. This time he called in, wanting her to remember homecoming. You all remember homecoming, the first big dance of the year. And for the freshmen, this is the first big dance of their lives, the first time the girls get to wear long dresses, the first time the guys have to buy corsages.

Leslie's dress is lavender, and she's told Skip so she knows her corsage will have some lavender-colored flowers. She's gotten Skip a boutonniere, a miniature white rose tied up with a bit of lavender ribbon. It's sitting in a little box on the table next to the door, a little white box. Now the doorbell rings, it's Skip, and he's all dressed up too, and Leslie thinks how great he looks, but right away Leslie's mom notices that Skip is not carrying a white box. He should be carrying a white box, the kind with a plastic window so you can see the lavender-colored flowers on crumpled green paper. But he doesn't have the box. Now Leslie notices too.

There can be no doubt. Skip has forgotten The Corsage. It's back home in the family's icebox, on the top shelf next to the milk and the ketchup, balanced on top of the mayonnaise. They're going to have to go back and get it.

Emily couldn't believe it. She stared at the radio, laughing, amazed. Jeff had almost done that. He hadn't told her about it for at least another year, but coming to pick her up for their very first homecoming, he had forgotten her corsage. But unlike this poor Skip, he had remembered about a block from her house and had forced his father to turn around.

She couldn't resist. She had to talk to him. Her memory for numbers was good and she quickly dialed the one the operator had given for him two weeks ago. He answered.

"Jeff, this is Emily. Aren't you glad to know you aren't the only schmuck in the world who forgets corsages?"

"I would be," he answered, clearly knowing exactly what she was talking about, "if I believed in this Skip fellow. But that's a little more information than most fifteen-year-olds would offer on a song dedication."

"Oh, of course." Emily shook her head, laughing at herself. "What kid would tell that story on himself? Do you think Woody made it up?"

"Woody? Our Woody? Make something up?" Jeff laughed, "But it made me think . . . although I probably shouldn't say this since you might blow my head off if I'm wrong, but our first homecoming, wasn't your dress lavender like this Leslie's was?"

"You know, it was." Emily hadn't thought about that. "I can't believe that you remembered."

"You are a memorable woman."

"Okay then, Christmas Formal junior year?"

He made a grimacing sound. "Ah . . . white?"

"Pale blue. You should have quit while you were ahead."

"Next time I'm ahead, I will."

* * *

Woody pulled off his earphones slowly, staring down at the console. He shouldn't have done it, talked about Jeff like that. He sat vacantly for a moment, then realized what he had to do. Jumping up, he bumped into Trent Peters, the late-night man, and shoved him aside as he hurried out of the booth.

He was gasping by the time he got to the mail slots, almost wretching as he leaned over the trash can. It was empty.

There was still a light on in the music director's office. Woody charged in, grabbing Stan's arm, pushing the earphones off his head. "Where does the trash go? You know, when they take it out of here, where does it go?"

Stan pulled back, puzzled. "The Dumpster in the parking lot—is that what you're talking about?"

The Dumpster, of course. Woody barreled down the hall, pushed open the steel door leading into the back lot. The Dumpster was big and he had to stretch to see inside.

It was full—cartons, boxes, green bag after green bag. There was no way to find one letter in all those green bags. Woody slumped forward, leaning his forehead against the cool metal.

Now he couldn't promise Jeff that he wouldn't do it again.

four

Hemphill and Associates had an odd mix of clients. With no major league ballplayers, no tennis stars or golfers, the big-money clients were boxers and figure skaters. The little clients were professional bowlers, surfers, bodybuilders, long-distance dogsled racers, athletes who made little money from their sport and supported themselves through speaking engagements and endorsement contracts. When that money came in, the agency took its 20 percent and then invested the remainder (taking another 5 percent of the investment income) so that no client ever ended up working in a picture framing shop.

Crispin Hemphill had three professionals working with him. Stuart Zorelli, an attorney by training, tended to the endorsement contracts. Liz Cygen with a public relations background ran the speakers bureau, booking clients into sales meetings and sports banquets, then helping them write their standard "how to get to the top and stay there" speeches. Emily, the third professional, advised Crispin on investments.

Emily liked her job. She admired the discipline that the clients brought to their sport and marveled at the immaturity some of them exhibited in every other aspect of their lives. With clients making complete idiots of themselves on

Saturday night, every Monday morning brought a fresh set of crises, and there was nothing Emily enjoyed more than being the calm one in a crisis.

But nothing dramatic seemed to have happened while she had been in Nancy Hanks. Emily was at her desk, examining her calendar to try to figure out how she was going to get back there in three weeks, when a knock on her open door caused her to look up. It was Liz Cygen.

"Do you have a minute?" she asked.

"Yes, of course." But Emily spoke without the enthusiasm she would have had two years ago when she considered Liz her best friend. Two years ago, Liz might have been coming into Emily's office to hear about Emily's weekend. Now she was in here to talk about herself.

The two women had met when they were working for the same bank more than five years ago. Emily was in the trust department, Liz in public relations. Each of those departments had its own Xerox machine so making copies of something was such quick work that people tended to do it themselves. But one day both those two machines were being serviced, and everyone had to use the copier in the research department. A line formed, and Emily stepped in it behind Liz.

The line was long, and the secretaries in it were waving all the men to the front. Perhaps because they thought Emily and Liz were also on the clerical staff, perhaps because they did not extend that courtesy to other women, Emily and Liz had to wait . . . until at last they had, rather guiltily, returned to their offices, giving the material to their own secretaries to copy.

After that they had become good friends, sharing complaints about the men in the bank, the men in their social lives, and the shoe stores in the Loop. Crispin Hemphill knew Liz's family, and when he talked to Liz about coming to work for him, she suggested that he interview Emily too.

Two years ago, however, Liz had gotten married, and Emily found that they had less and less to talk about, especially now that Liz was pregnant.

All that mattered to Liz was her pregnancy. During her early queasy days, she had invested eating saltines with

more drama than Emily could have imagined that act to be worth. Emily felt that Liz no longer wanted a friend; what she needed was an audience for her pregnancy. There was no exchange anymore. Emily was not pregnant; how could her life be as interesting as Liz considered her own?

She shut the door to Emily's office. "Oh, Emily, would you see if you can feel the baby? I felt it move on Saturday—I know I did—and I want to see if people can feel it from the outside."

Emily did not stand up. "Didn't Mason try?" Mason was Liz's husband. Emily didn't like him.

"Yes, but he got bored and quit. So please, do try." Liz came around the desk and grabbed Emily's hand, pressing it to the side of her navy maternity jumper.

Emily was still seated so Liz's swelling self was directly in her line of sight. For all that had been wrong with the bank, things like this had not happened there. Emily tried to think of something to say. "Is Reggie Forrester coming in today?"

Reggie Forrester was a young boxer with such a promising amateur career that Crispin Hemphill himself was in charge of recruiting him.

Liz nodded. "Half his family is—oh, did you feel that?"

"No, I'm sorry. I didn't." Emily tried to pull her hand away, but Liz gripped it more tightly. "So what were you saying?"

"About Mason? That he tried to . . ."

Emily listened patiently to Mason's short-lived efforts to feel the baby, then steered Liz back to professional matters. "What were you saying about Reggie Forrester? That half his family is where?"

"They're all down in Crispin's office, having coffee. He's taking them out to lunch."

"Then we'd better go meet them, hadn't we?" Emily freed herself from Liz and stood up.

She had visited Reggie and his family during her trip east last month, but she discovered on entering her boss's starkly contemporary office that sometime between that trip and now Reggie had acquired a father.

She had seen this happen before. A boy, raised by a mother whose last name was not the same as his, found a

male role model in the owner of the local gym. Then when he turned out to have a talent that might make some money, his occasional father reappeared.

Archie Forrester, Reggie's father, was, although bald, a good-looking man with flashy clothes and a loud voice. When Crispin introduced Emily to him, he took her hand in both of his, but spoke to Crispin. "I like a man who hires pretty secretaries."

Emily forced herself to leave her hand in his.

"Actually," Crispin said evenly, "Emily's not one of our secretaries. She'll be advising Reggie on his investments."

"You mean his money?" Archie dropped her hand in surprise. "But you were talking about shopping malls, oil wells, things like that."

Emily hated it when people spoke not to her, but to the man standing next to her; that was part of why she had left the bank. Crispin, bless his heart, never answered for her. "Yes, we do do a lot of limited partnerships," she said.

"But who decides? I mean, who makes the actual decisions?" Archie was still talking to Crispin. Clearly he couldn't believe that it was five-foot-one Emily with her cute little nose who would get his son involved in shopping mall development.

"Ultimately, of course, the client decides," Emily answered. "We make recommendations, and some of our clients are not very interested in investments."

"Not very interested" was an extremely tactful way to describe some clients' foolhardy notions about money. Reggie Forrester, who was basically a very nice kid, had already confided to Emily that as soon as he made some real money he was going to buy his grandmother a Rolls Royce. Emily had every intention of persuading him that Grandma would be as happy with a top-of-the-line Cadillac. Not only would it save him a hundred thousand dollars, but the old lady would have a lot easier time finding someone to work on the car. Emily knew Reggie's neighborhood. Enough of the drug dealers had grandmothers that the nearest Cadillac showroom treated large, elderly black women with a great deal more respect than Emily was now getting from Reggie's father.

But Archie Forrester, however insulting he was being, did not upset Emily. She had been through much, much more.

Last week, she had stopped by the brokerage firm, and an associate of her broker had greeted her with, "What a great dress! Red is really your color." What should she have said to that? Ignoring the compliment would have made her seem ingracious. If she had acknowledged it with a cold "thank you," the man would have gone back to his office and called her prickly. But to have appeared pleased would have suggested that what he had thought of her appearance had mattered.

She had been at yet another meeting the week before and found that all the men in the room had seemed to know more than she did. Usually she was one of the best prepared at any meeting. Then she had learned that the men had played golf together over the weekend. That was where the real flow of information had been, on the golf course. But how could they have asked her? They were nice married men and she was pretty and single.

Traveling was even worse. Men hated it when a woman—especially a small woman—drove herself, and so they were always after Emily to turn in her rented car. "Oh, I'll take you to the airport." But on the way to the airport, there would be these sudden little side-trips; the man would drive her by his house, his boat, his club, needing to impress her because she was an attractive woman. He would be showing off and she would be glancing at her watch. But how many times could she mention the time without sounding like an obsessive female? Then of course, she would miss her plane because that was what he—at least subconsciously—had wanted to have happen. She'd have to sit with him for another hour in the dark corner of the airport bar, not because he wanted to seduce her, but because he wanted to be in control. She might be the one with the money to invest; her clients' cash might make all the difference to his development deal, but lo and behold, he could jerk the right strings and she would miss her plane.

And those were strings that he would have never seen had she been a man.

* * *



Woody eased open the door to the conference room. Roger Fordham, the station manager, stopped talking, and people's heads swiveled to see who was coming into the staff meeting so late. The only empty seats were on the far side of the table, and the people along the back were leaning against the wall, balancing their chairs on two legs. Woody had to cross around to the front of the room, walking behind Roger.

He knew that the people at the station didn't like him. The guys who had been around for a while resented the fact that his program was the only one that was syndicated. The young people did not like any kind of retrospective programming, believing that it took too much airtime away from contemporary music. How could young groups get established when the baby boomers, the ones with the jobs and the money, only wanted to listen to the music of their teen years?

Woody could understand why they felt the way they did—he really could—but he wasn't going to change his show. He had struggled too long to get out of the kind of jobs they had.

At the beginning of each show, every other deejay at the station was presented with a computer printout detailing the show minute by minute. The printout told the jay which commercials to play when, when to give the time and temp, when to announce the station's call letters, even what songs to play when. At 12:03 you played the tire store ad; at 12:04 you played the current number seven hit. Stan, the music director, had this computer that determined what order the songs would be played in. Woody couldn't understand that. Who needed a computer to figure that nobody wanted to hear "Hey, Paula" after the Grateful Dead?

Fortunately, Woody's printout only listed the commercials and reminded him about the legal stuff, everything the F.C.C. said you had to do. Everything else was up to him.

He only worked on Sunday nights . . . and was only paid for working Sunday nights. That meant he had to do other things. As Tommy Sarandon, he reviewed books about popular culture; Sid Goethe wrote concert and record reviews. It was confusing to be so many people, but anything

was better than doing a show on which a computer made all the decisions.

* * *

Emily returned to her calendar and realized there was only one way for her to get home for the second time in one month and that was to drop everything and work. She canceled a haircut and rescheduled, for the third time, her dental checkup. The baroque paintings show left the Art Institute without her having seen it, and once again, she missed the deadline for enrolling in a lunchtime aerobics class. She had her secretary call Steve DeLoss's mother to invite him to sit at her table even though delegating that task might forever blacken her name in Nancy Hanks.

On top of everything, her mother got it into her head that Emily ought to bring down the shoes she would be wearing with the bridesmaid's dress. That meant that in her spare time, Emily had to go out and find dyeable satin pumps in a size four-and-a-half.

She didn't even listen to Woody's show, figuring that she could tape it and listen as she drove home, fast-forwarding through the commercials and the songs she didn't like. But when she was finally in the car Saturday morning, merging onto the Stevenson, she realized that she had, most uncharacteristically, forgotten to bring the tapes with her.

There was more traffic than she had expected, and once she got on 80, Emily calculated that she would not make it to Nancy Hanks until a little after twelve. The bridal shop was expecting them at noon, and as Emily knew that her mother was a maniac about being on time, she called Glenda from the car phone, offering to go straight to the shop.

"But you won't have had lunch," Glenda protested.

"I can try on a dress without having eaten," Emily said as she swept by a tractor-trailer truck.

But Glenda Gordon, although an iron-slim size three herself, was always worried about the people around her starving to death so Emily had to promise to stop at home. Glenda was waiting in the driveway with a tuna fish sandwich wrapped in a napkin, which she thrust into her daughter's hand.

Someday, Emily thought as she drove through town eating her tuna fish, someday she would give her mother something really important to worry about.

Glenda had already sent Kelly on ahead—apparently to be sure that the bridal shop did not go out of business because the Gordon women were going to be fifteen minutes late for a fitting. Kelly was lounging on one of the shop's gilt chairs. When she heard them come into the shop, she jumped up and gave Emily a quick hug. "Come on. I can't wait for you to see your dress. It's so wonderful. You're going to love it."

Emily couldn't help laughing. That was one of the things she so loved about her sister. She was the sort of person who always put a smile on your face.

Back in the dressing area, the saleslady picked up a mass of stiff white netting that was tied into a bulky figure eight. She untied a string and the figure eight popped open, forming a big circle. She dropped it at Emily's feet.

It was a moment before Emily understood what this big circle was. The smile that her sister always put on her face disappeared. She spoke carefully. "We're going to wear hoopskirts?"

"Isn't it great?" Kelly exclaimed. "When you were a kid, wouldn't you have died to wear a hoopskirt?"

Emily stared at her. Kelly was a jock, a phys ed major; she had finished the Chicago marathon; she wanted to start training for a triathlon. What was she doing with Scarlett O'Hara fantasies? Or, more to the point, what was she doing inflicting such fantasies on her thirty-four-year-old sister?

Kelly knelt down, scrunching up the net so that Emily could step into it. Kelly pulled it up, tightening the drawstring around Emily's waist while the saleslady eased the plastic off something in a particularly sweet shade of blue. She gave one edge of it to Emily's mother, and the two of them lifted the dress over Emily's head. The satin slithered down, falling over the hoop. Emily found the armholes with her hands that still smelled of tuna fish. Her mother eased the zipper up, and Emily turned to look at herself in the mirror.

At least as much of herself as she could see. The hoopskirt pushed the blue satin out beyond the confines of even the

three-way mirror. What she could see was all ruffles—a deep flounce falling down from her bare shoulders and more ruffles spilling down the front and around the hem. She closed her eyes. Didn't anyone realize how old she was?

"Don't forget the sash," said Glenda, and Emily opened her eyes to see her mother looping a wide ribbon of lighter blue around her waist, tying it in a bow that looked like a big butterfly. The ends of the sash trailed nearly to the skirt's ruffled hem.

"Isn't it wonderful?" Kelly sat down on one of the gilded chairs, then bounced back up. "Don't you love it?"

"Does the bodice fit?" Glenda asked.

"It's fine." It was horrible, and not just the bodice. The whole dress was horrible. Emily looked at herself in the mirror again. "What color is this?"

"Alice blue," Kelly told her. "You'll be in Alice blue with a powder blue sash and the bridesmaids will be in powder with an Alice blue sash." Then she paused. "You don't mind it being sleeveless, do you?"

Emily shook her head. "No, I don't worry about that, not anymore." The scars that the accident had left on her forearms were so faint, she was so used to them, that she no longer let them influence what she wore. Being sleeveless was not what was wrong with this dress.

"I'm so glad you like it." Kelly adjusted a ruffle at Emily's shoulder. "Do you think you'll be able to wear it again? The others say they will."

Yes, but the other bridesmaids were Kelly's sorority sisters and they were still going to college proms. "Of course," Emily lied. "Of course I will. The agency puts on a big dinner-dance once a year for all our clients and I always have a terrible time finding something to wear."

The reason Emily had such a difficult time was that part of her job was persuading people like Archie Forrester that she could manage money better than they could. This dress would not help.

Glenda tugged at the seams for a moment. "I don't think we'll have to alter it much. Now where are those shoes?"

Emily pointed to the shoe box containing her white satin pumps. The next time she saw them they would be dyed Alice blue.

Kelly handed her one shoe. Emily took it and lifted her foot. The foot hit the inside of the dress. She grabbed Kelly to keep from falling over.

"What's wrong?" Glenda asked.

"I've lost my feet."

"How can you lose your feet?" Her mother was always literal. "They're at the end of your legs."

"I know where they are, but I can't get to them." She let go of Kelly. "Let me sit down."

"That's even harder," Kelly told her. "The first time I sat down in my dress, it nearly gave me a black eye. Here, let me help." She took the shoes and knelt down.

Feeling entirely too much like Cinderella, Emily picked up her ruffles, stuck out one foot and then the other. When shod in the satin pumps, she let the hoop fall back to ground level. Fortunately Prince Charming was an athletic young woman and managed to scoot out of the way in time.

"By the way," Kelly said, "when you wear the dress to your agency's party, don't wear the shoes."

"Why not?" What else was she going to wear them with?

"Because that's how you can tell who's wearing an old bridesmaid's dress—she's got on dyed shoes. So if you don't want people to think that you're a leftover bridesmaid, don't wear the shoes."

If Emily showed up in this dress with or without these shoes, people wouldn't think she was a leftover bridesmaid, they would think she was a leftover lobotomette.

She looked back in the mirror again. Emily liked clothes, she knew what looked good on her small frame; she also knew what kind of clothes were appropriate for the business she was in. She discouraged people from giving her clothes as a present; she rarely shopped with friends. In the stores on her own, she was quick and decisive.

But the minute she came home, she lost control of her life. Her parents sent her off to parties she didn't want to go to, made her eat tuna sandwiches that she didn't want to eat, had her visit people she didn't want to visit. "It will be for ten minutes," Glenda would say. "We'll only stay for ten minutes. I know they will want to see you."

But right now all that seemed like nothing. Come Labor

Day, she was going to wear a hoopskirt and Alice blue satin pumps.

* * *

Jeff Grant rented half of a frame duplex about a half mile from the high school. It wasn't much, but he and his neighbor kept it nice. He mowed the lawn and Jeannie Ripkin, the woman who lived in the other half, planted morning glories and petunias along the railing in front of the concrete slab that served as their shared front porch. Like Jeff, Jeannie was divorced, but money was even tighter for her. She had two kids and was raising them on what she made as a waitress out at the steak house.

She was working in the flower bed early Saturday evening as Jeff came out of the house. At the sound of his door, she looked up, then sat back on her heels. "Don't you look spiffy?"

"No, I don't," Jeff protested. "I look exactly as I always do."

"Okay, you look exactly like you do whenever you wear a suit and you never wear a suit . . . although you have enough of them. So who is she?"

Jeff's suits were from his other life as a successful author on a publicity tour. He had never told Jeannie about that life. "There is no 'she,'" he answered. "Unless it's some little girl in a wheelchair." He explained about this evening's fund-raiser.

Jeannie wasn't interested. She had too many problems of her own to care about ones that weren't right in front of her. Jeff's problematic social life she did care about as it was right next door.

"Oh, come on," she prodded good-naturedly. "You're meeting someone. A good waitress knows these things. Who is she?"

Jeff decided to answer . . . and in terms Jeannie would understand. "She's Gordon Construction."

"Gordon Construction?" Jeannie whistled. "Let's start at the top, shall we? But, wait a minute, I thought the Gordon girl was a college kid. Things are tough enough without grown men taking out little girls."

Jeff laughed. "The college kid has an older sister, a half sister, actually. She's my age."

"And you're taking her out?"

Jeff shook his head. "She's buying my dinner."

"She is? What's wrong with her? Getting men to pay for stuff is the only reason for putting up with them." Jeannie shook her head, unable to comprehend such bizarre behavior. "She must have money to burn."

"I think she does."

"Good for her." Jeannie was not one to envy other women's good fortune. "Listen, if she gets sick of you, give her my phone number. I've never dated a woman before, but they can't be any worse than men."

"I imagine they are better."

"And just how would you know?"

She had a point there. Jeff did not date. At the moment, he was the only single male in the entire school system, the only one, which was a far trickier position than he cared to be in. If he took a pretty kindergarten teacher to dinner on Friday night, by Saturday morning her friends were picking out their bridesmaids' dress. It wasn't fair to her, or to him.

A teacher in a small town leads a very public life. Jeff had had an abrupt initiation into that during his first week of teaching. He had been coming out of the liquor store, carrying a case of beer, dressed in a pair of cutoffs. He had stopped to admire a young lady in sateen basketball shorts swish by, when he heard a sudden chorus of, "Hello, Mr. Grant."

So he bought his liquor out of town, he was careful about how he dressed, and he didn't date.

He didn't particularly like leading such a celibate life. Some nights Jeannie would knock on his door after she'd put her kids to bed. They would have a few beers, and when she would get up to leave, her smile would make it clear that she didn't have to go. Once in a while, he would come close to asking her to stay. But he never did.

He didn't think of himself as lonely. All day he was surrounded by people, and even when he was alone in the evening, the kids were with him in the form of their papers and their problems. Carolyn Markowitz, the only other teacher in the English department who cared anything

about innovative teaching techniques, lived down the block. At least one night a week, after she had put *her* kids to bed and her husband was settled in front of his ham radio, Jeff would go to her house and they would talk about teaching. Even the solitariness of training for the marathon last summer had been enlivened by Kelly Gordon's chatter. He wasn't lonely.

But Jeff tried hard to be honest with himself; that was the only thing that had gotten him through those last months with Britta, being honest with himself. And as he turned his car key in the ignition this Saturday night, he had to wonder: If his life was as fulfilling as he claimed, why was he so looking forward to seeing Emily Gordon?

five

The V.F.W. hall was on the outskirts of town, a low cinder block building surrounded by parking. A large foyer with a line of portable chrome coatracks led into the main room, which was decorated with flags and other military insignia. On the dark fiberboard paneling hung framed, black-and-white photographs of honorable veterans. A swag of red foam letters suspended over the stage spelled out the motto "To Honor the Dead by Serving the Living."

Emily suspected that the bartender hired for the evening had added a personal amendment: "To Honor the Dead by Serving the Living Slowly." She was in the bar line, hoping to get drinks for herself, Kelly, and Alex, and she had been standing in it for quite some time. Waiting in line was not Emily's strong suit.

Folding banquet tables, covered in white, took up most of the floor space and the area left for cocktails and mingling was rapidly filling with other people. Emily recognized fewer of them than she had expected.

She felt a light touch on her arm. It was Jeff.

"Why don't I recognize half these people?" she asked.

"Because you don't live here anymore. Me, I know everyone. Including your sister. I just talked to her."

His golden brown eyes were sparkling. There was some

kind of joke here. "My impression is that you talk to my sister a lot."

"No, she talks to me. When we're running, I'm much too winded to talk to her. But she's not always full of such good news. She told me all about the dress she's picked out for you to wear in her wedding. It sounds charming."

Kelly was not one to bore men with long descriptions of clothes; Jeff must have goaded her into it. "It is a delightful garment," Emily answered firmly. "What a shame that you won't get to see me in it."

"Oh, no, you're wrong there. Kelly and I are buddies now. She's already told me I'm invited to the wedding."

"You are?" Emily shifted her purse to her other arm. So Jeff was going to be at Kelly's wedding. That was just wonderful. Here she had finally had the nerve to look up a man with whom she had shared a much too interesting past, and he was going to see her decked out like the top of a music box.

She changed the subject. "Kelly told me you hurt your knee last fall. That's too bad."

He put his finger to his lips, shushing her. "Be quiet. Don't tell anyone it was last fall. I try to pass it off as an old war wound although"—he glanced over his shoulder at the photos of the honorable veterans—"I guess tonight I had better call it an old football injury."

"Just try," Emily dared him. "Bobby's jock friends might be here, and they all know that the only way you could have gotten a football injury was if you stumbled over them in the lunchroom. Why not admit that you forgot to tie your shoe and tripped over the lace?"

"Because that would be too near the truth," he answered instantly. "One thing that I learned from Woody is that only boring people tell the truth."

"Then I am in real trouble," Emily said calmly. "My imagination's so poor that my lies would be even more boring than my life."

I'm not like this, she thought suddenly. *I am usually tense, on edge. Is it being away from the people I do business with? Or is it being with him?*

"Speaking of bad imaginations," she continued, "it's hard for me to picture you as a serious runner." In fact, he

seemed so relaxed right now, as he stood with one hand in the pocket of his charcoal suit, that she couldn't imagine him being serious about anything—even though he had once been the most intent person she knew.

"I could send you a photograph," he offered.

"No. At Hemphill and Associates, we only look at videos. But, seriously, you're turning yourself into a jock—your father would have been pleased."

Jeff shrugged. "I suppose that's why I didn't start until after he died."

The bar line lurched forward, and Emily had to move a few steps to keep her place. She wondered how many people Jeff said things like that to. Surely not many. What had motivated the remark? Was it just an offhand acknowledgment of the past? *We were close once; there's no point in lying to you. It means no more than that.* Or had it sprung from a deeper impulse? *You are still the one person I can talk to. You're still the one person I know will understand.*

"Have you seen Bobby yet?" he asked. "I can hold your place in line if you want to go mingle."

Six years ago, he had hated lines as much as she did. "No, let's bag the line. I can survive without a drink, and if Kelly and Alex can't, that's their hard luck. Let's go find Bobby together."

So they moved across the room to where a little knot of people was gathered, presumably around Bobby. In a moment, that conversation broke up, a few people stepped back, and for the first time since the night of the accident, Emily saw Bobby Hutchinson.

He looked great—healthy and vigorous, with muscular arms and sun-streaked hair. Kelly had said that he played basketball almost every day with other guys in wheelchairs, that he competed in the javelin throw and the shot put, and had even run—if that was the right word—several marathons. He looked as if any moment he would rise effortlessly and walk across the room. But of course, he couldn't. That's why he was sitting down while everyone around him was standing.

Emily shivered, feelings that she thought she had long since laid to rest suddenly washing over her. The first reports of Bobby's condition had been so bad, telling of no

movement, followed by supposedly encouraging talk that he might be able to work a reading machine. She had been sitting right next to him, no more than four feet away. Why had this happened to him and not to her?

And if she felt that way, how must Jeff have felt? He had only had his ribs taped.

Bobby noticed them, and his open face brightened in a smile. He turned, the quick hands that had once used a basketball to mesmerize a gym full of teenagers now working the chrome outer rim of his chair's wheels.

He greeted them, and then leaned back in his chair, calling to his wife. "Wendy, here are some people I want you to meet. Emily, Jeff, this is my wife, Wendy. Wendy, this is Jeff Grant and Emily"—Bobby cast a quick glance at Emily's left hand—"is it still Emily Gordon?"

"It is. I always feel like when I'm home, I need to wear a sign—I'm Not Married." Emily sketched a placard across the front of her silk dress. If anyone was going to comment on her failure to get married, it was going to be herself. "My mother's home embroidering me a scarlet *S* for single."

"That's nothing." Wendy Hutchinson, a tall, attractive blond, smiled in sympathy. "My first marriage was to my high school boyfriend, and I felt like I needed to wear a sign—I'm Divorced and Don't You Dare Call Me by That Creep's Name Anymore."

"Then you should walk around with Emily," Jeff said cheerfully, "because I'm sure plenty of people ask her why she didn't marry *her* high school boyfriend."

Emily blinked. She hadn't expected such casual references to their past. "You can take that remark," she said to Wendy, "as evidence of the fact that I too had a high school boyfriend who to this very day is a creep."

Bobby laughed. "That's right. I've been telling her that. Jeff is a creep . . . he won the only state championship our year."

"Then 'creep' is awfully mild for the way you must have felt about him," Wendy said and then turned to Jeff. "Let me offer you some very belated congratulations. It must have been very good for Bobby to have someone beat him. What sport did you play?"

Jeff shook his head. "No sport at all. It was an award our

school newspaper won, and it wasn't a state championship. I'm surprised that Bobby even remembered."

The award that Jeff was now dismissing so casually was one that Columbia University's School of Journalism gave to high school newspapers. The competition was open to every high school paper in the country, but until Mr. Crockett's arrival, it had never occurred to anyone at Nancy Hanks High to enter. Winning had been so wonderful, so unexpected. The *Herald* staff had never dreamed that they could compete with what the rich suburban kids at New Trier and Evanston Township were doing, to say nothing of what was being published by high schools back east. The award had nearly been the high point of Emily and Jeff's senior year, surpassed only by the time Jeff had been suspended by the principal for his editorial.

"Of course I remembered," Bobby was saying. "Are you kidding? You did better than me. Do you think I would forget a thing like that?"

Wendy shook her head. "Was this man as obnoxious and competitive in those days as he makes himself out to be?" she asked Jeff.

"Tell her the truth," Bobby said with a laugh. "She refuses to believe that I used to be exactly like her first husband."

"The truth?" Jeff turned to Wendy. "The truth is that he was very competitive, mildly obnoxious, and no worse than me."

"What a pair you must have been." Wendy waved her hand, dismissing them. "I'm going to go mingle. I'd rather talk to total strangers who want to tell me boring stories about Bob as a little boy."

Bobby sighed good-naturedly. "I guess I should go too. But it was great seeing you two again. Let's try and get together sometime. We've got a new van this year and we're planning on bringing the kids to see my folks a couple times this summer." And with that he wheeled himself away, people stepping aside as his chair passed, then reassembling in little clusters in his wake.

Jeff drew close to Emily. "I have the el-sleazo question of the year, which you are to forget that I asked. Bobby's kids—are they his or are they relics of Mr. Creep, the first husband?"

"The older boy is a stepson," said Emily, herself a relic from a first husband. "But the two little girls—I assume they are his. Kelly said one looks a lot like him."

"That's nice."

"I didn't know you were so prochildren."

"I'm very prochildren, but in this case I was being pro–anatomical competence."

"Do you talk to your students like this? I don't have a clue as to what you mean."

He laughed. "Bobby's condition has been described to me both as being paralyzed from the waist down and as being unable to walk. I don't know a thing about it, but there seems to be an important difference between those two. At least it would be an important difference to me."

He had a good point, but not one Emily thought it wise to comment upon. She glanced around the room. The cocktail area was crowded. The only people sitting at the tables were women already massaging feet that ached from their rarely worn high heels.

"I suppose we should start rounding up our table," she said. "Do you see Steve DeLoss? I don't think I even know what he looks like."

"I usually see him when he comes to see his mother." Jeff glanced around the room. "There he is."

Emily followed his gaze. "Where? I don't see him."

Jeff pointed.

"Him?" Emily was surprised. "That tall one?"

Their senior class had voted Jeff "Most Likely to Succeed." Bobby had been "Most Popular," and Woody "Most Unforgettable." If there had been such a category, Steve DeLoss, short, shy, without a thing to say for himself, would have been "Most Forgettable." Except who could forget those pep assemblies that started with the cheerleaders' usual skit and ended with Steve playing his violin, whatever beauty he might be creating swallowed by the cavernous gym. Pep assemblies got everyone out of first period, but listening to a violin solo was so far down on the student body's list of preferred activities that most people would have rather stayed in class.

"My mother says Steve's doing really well with his

music," Emily said as they worked their way through the crowd. "But her information is from his mother."

"I think he's doing great. He'd been first violinist with the New Haven Symphony for a couple years, and apparently he's about to audition for some of the really big symphonies."

"Maybe," Emily said drily, "we should have voted *him* 'Most Likely to Succeed.'"

"He's right up there," Jeff acknowledged. If Emily had intended her remark as a little dig about his current job—and she was not entirely sure whether she had intended that or not—Jeff had not noticed. "Although I don't know how you'd compare his career with Woody's . . . or yours."

Emily appreciated that. "No one else has written a best-selling book," she said, trying to make up for her last remark.

Jeff flicked his hand, dismissing his own success. "That's the publisher's doing. The problem we face right now is getting from here to there. But I think if we break to the south and skirt that table, we can come up to Steve on the left flank."

The maneuver worked, both as a conversation stopper and as a route to Steve. In a moment, they were in front of a tall, birdlike man with a coarse crop of straw-colored curls and wire-rimmed glasses. He had an elasticized bandage around his left wrist running up over his hand. It was fastened with Velcro straps and a rigid brace kept his hand bent backward at about a twenty-degree angle. Emily guessed, from her experience with the contraptions that her clients sometimes wore, that Steve had tendonitis. She wondered what had happened to the auditions with the major symphonies; they had probably gone on without him.

"I didn't recognize you," she said after they had exchanged polite greetings. "What happened? You used to be the only person in the room I could look at without breaking my neck."

Steve ran his hand through his hair, then scratched his arm. He had a nervous, jittery air. "My mother always told me that I'd get my height late, that it was the family growth pattern, and for once she was actually right."

"Your mother was right about something?" a teasing voice put in. "We need to record that."

The woman who had spoken was not anyone from Nancy Hanks, Emily was confident of that; this was not a person you would forget. She was an astonishingly beautiful American Indian. Her coppery skin glowed over high cheekbones, and her gleaming hair, blacker than Emily's, brushed the shoulders of a turquoise silk dress. As comfortable as Emily usually felt about her appearance, she suddenly wished that she hadn't had to cancel her hair appointment last week.

"Steve's mother was also right about Steve's talent," Jeff said to the woman and then, as any man in his right mind would have done, he introduced himself.

"Oh, my God, I'm sorry," Steve apologized. "I never remember to introduce people. This is LeeAnn, LeeAnn Summer. Emily Gordon and Jeff Grant."

This was Steve's girlfriend? Emily was amazed.

LeeAnn smiled. Clearly she was used to Steve forgetting about her, and her smile said that she put up with it because no one could ever, not for a moment, believe that she deserved such treatment.

"I've been dying to meet the two of you," she said in a rich, warm voice. "Steve's been so excited about seeing you again. I've never heard him speak so highly of nonmusicians before. He hated high school as much as I did, but he has such good memories of Jeff and Emily."

Emily felt the spring-weight wool of Jeff's jacket sleeve brush against her, and she was careful not to look at him, just as she knew he was carefully not looking at her. Why did Steve have such good memories of them? He'd been in a lot of their classes, but they hadn't considered him a particular friend. He wasn't a part of their crowd. Emily wouldn't have even invited him to sit at her table tonight if any of the journalism staff had stayed in Nancy Hanks.

Apparently she and Jeff had been more important to Steve than he had been to them. Even after all this time, Emily found that a little embarrassing. She wanted to apologize. But what could she say? "I'm sorry I didn't like you more sixteen years ago"?

Jeff spoke. "It's nice to hear that Steve's got good memo-

ries of us because if it wasn't for him, Emily might not have any memories at all."

LeeAnn looked puzzled, her carefully shaped eyebrows drawing together.

"Didn't he tell you?" Emily asked, relieved to have something positive to say about Steve, as if praising him now would compensate for ignoring him in high school. "That's why you're here tonight. Steve saved my life."

Steve flushed. "I didn't save your life," he mumbled.

"Yes, you did. How many people could have heard that accident from inside a closed house?"

LeeAnn was very curious, and so between them, Jeff and Emily told her the story of the accident. "No one ever drives that road at night," Emily finished. "God only knows how long we would have been there if Steve hadn't heard the crash."

Steve tried to shut them up. "It was no big deal. I just called the ambulance, that's all."

"Well, it was a big deal to me," Emily responded. "I was bleeding, and one thing people kept saying afterward was how lucky I was Steve's hearing is so acute because if the ambulance had come any later, I would have been in trouble."

"What caused the accident?" LeeAnn asked. "Was it just routine, teenage bad driving?"

"Who knows?" Jeff replied. "Bobby wasn't drinking, and usually he was a decent enough driver. But it was raining. That probably made the difference."

"My father always thought that another car might have been involved," Emily added. "He went out to the site and he decided that Bobby must have been trying to pass someone, but none of us remember."

She felt Steve stir, but before he could say anything, LeeAnn spoke. "I can't imagine how I'd feel if I was injured in an accident that was someone else's fault. Were you angry with Bobby? Did you blame him for what happened?"

Emily shook her head. "No. What happened to him was so much worse . . . but while I was in the hospital, I did get angry with other people, some of the nurses, my parents, people like that."

"And me?" Jeff asked.

"No," Emily answered honestly. She hadn't let herself get angry with him; she had needed him too much. "It was Tracy Mendion I got mad at."

"Tracy Mendion?" Jeff looked puzzled. "What on earth did she do to you?" Then he stopped, remembering.

Tracy Mendion, pretty and popular, had been Bobby's girlfriend. Three days after the accident, Jeff had come into Emily's hospital room to explain why he was taking Tracy to the prom.

"She has to go; she's up for queen," he had said. "Her brother was going to come home from college to take her, but since I'm class president and have to go too, it only makes sense . . ."

It had not made the least bit of sense to Emily. What were brothers for, but to come home from college at a time like this? Or Tracy could have skipped the prom. That's what Emily had thought she ought to do.

The afternoon of the prom Jeff had come to the hospital, bringing Emily the flowers that would have been in her corsage. He had been careful not to act excited about the evening ahead, but Emily had known that he was going to have a good time. Tracy had had too much pride to let any date of hers not have one, even if he was someone she had as little in common with as Jeff Grant.

"But Tracy wasn't the only one determined to make me miserable," Emily added. "I remember being furious with my dad, the way he kept harping on the idea that there was another car. I wanted him to shut up and leave me alone."

Steve rocked back on his heels. "Another car? What did he mean by that? I remember him calling me the next day, but he didn't say anything about another car."

"There wouldn't have been any point," Emily answered. "You heard the impact. Another car would have been long gone . . . if there was another car."

"But why did he think there was one?" Steve looked worried; his lean shoulders were hunched forward. "How could he know?"

Emily couldn't imagine why he was so interested. "Beats me. It was probably just one of those notions parents get, but I could ask him if you like."

"Oh, no." His response was quick. "No, not at all."

Emily waited for a moment in case he had more to say. He bit his lip, and his eyes darted around the room, but he didn't speak. So she looked for her sister, and finding her a few feet away with Alex and their friends, Emily signaled to her. Together, they started herding everyone to their table.

At the table, Jeff pulled out one of the end chairs for Emily and then spoke to Steve and LeeAnn as he gestured to the seat at Emily's right. "Do you mind if I take the seat of honor? I'm left-handed, and anywhere else at the table, my elbow becomes a lethal weapon."

In high school, when they were studying together at the library or having Cokes in the back booth of the drugstore, Jeff had always sat at Emily's left, not her right. Then they could hold hands, and he would still have his left hand free, and she her right, to study or eat. It hadn't mattered if Jeff had bumped elbows with whoever was on the other side of him; what mattered was holding Emily's hand.

LeeAnn prodded Steve into the chair on Emily's left, then sat down next to him. Kelly and her friends filled in the other end of the table. LeeAnn immediately turned and introduced herself to the college boy next to her, leaving him so dazed that the conversations from the two halves of the table never again merged.

Emily noticed Jeff watching LeeAnn. He was smiling at her efforts to talk to Kelly's friend. When she finally gave up and turned back to her contemporaries, Jeff spoke to her. "Steve may have told you all about us, but he hasn't said one word about you."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" she asked, then obligingly filled in the details. She was from Oklahoma, had gone to college in Oklahoma City and then done graduate work at Yale. She'd met Steve trying to board a city bus with two fifty-dollar bills and his violin case. She was now a chemist with a drug company in North Carolina.

"I wouldn't have picked you for that," Jeff said.

That was Emily's reaction too. LeeAnn had an appearance and personality that seemed wasted in chemistry. Emily wouldn't have been surprised if LeeAnn had been the anchorwoman for a major-market local news program.

"I went to a terrible high school," LeeAnn explained,

"that had one good teacher, an unmarried female scientist. So that's what I am, an unmarried female scientist."

"What would you have done if your teacher had been an unmarried *male* scientist?" Jeff asked. "Would you have had a sex change operation?"

"Without question," LeeAnn answered. It was clear that she liked Jeff. "I would have done it in a flash."

"Jeff teaches high school," Steve said.

"You do?" LeeAnn's eyebrows shot up and she glanced sideward at Emily, her black hair swinging forward to hide her face from Jeff. It was a very single-woman-to-single-woman look, one that Emily immediately understood. Jeff had made a good first impression—he always did—and LeeAnn was surprised to hear that he taught high school.

Well, she wasn't the only one surprised about that. While there wasn't anything wrong with teaching high school in a small town, it wasn't what people expected when they had voted him "Most Likely to Succeed."

Emily found herself wanting to explain, wanting to tell LeeAnn that this wasn't the real Jeff, that he had written a best-selling book, that he had made a real name for himself, that teaching was temporary, she was sure it was.

But she kept quiet. She knew a few successful women back in Chicago who were involved with less successful men, and it was like they were apologizing for them—"David has so many interests" . . . "Michael does such good in his work." It was embarrassing; it was hard to know what to say to someone who had broken the single-woman's code, that you never, not ever, got involved with someone who made less than you did.

If Jeff noticed LeeAnn's expression, he didn't seem to react. But he did turn to Steve. "I see that brace on your wrist. Is something wrong?"

Steve had been running the flat side of the brace along the edge of the table. He stopped. "I guess so. I've got tendonitis."

"I've heard that that can be unbelievably painful," Emily said. "What are they doing for yours?"

"I've been resting it. I haven't played in a couple of months, but if there's a lot of scar tissue, they may end up having to operate."

"What are your chances?" Emily had long since learned not to offer sympathy to athletes facing career-ending injuries. Steve wasn't an athlete, but surely the psychology was the same.

"There's no question that I'll at least have eighty-five to ninety percent use back."

"Is that enough?"

"No."

Emily had noticed that whatever discomfort had prompted Steve's adolescent shyness was now manifested in a tendency to repeat himself. This was the first time he had spoken concisely.

"But his mother always told him," LeeAnn put in, her voice dry, "that it's noble to suffer for art. So she must be thrilled because now it hurts him to pick up a paper."

"My ex-wife," Jeff said, "also believed in suffering for art, but she always wanted everyone else to suffer right along with her."

Emily stiffened. The last thing in the world she wanted to hear about was Jeff's marriage. Come to a party and be reminded of how some man left you to go get married. What great fun. Why had he brought it up?

Because he had some sense. Emily leaned back as a waiter reached around her for the dish of canned fruit cocktail that she had not touched. She and Jeff had to talk about his marriage. Yes, she wouldn't have to hide among the frozen lima beans if she saw him in the grocery store, but if they were ever going to be friends again—and for all that was right and good about Emily's life in Chicago, she was short on friends—this marriage would have to be discussed.

There were so many questions—why, when, who—but how do you have this conversation with your ex-lover in front of two strangers?

The black-coated arm of the waiter sat a plate of chicken and peas in front of her. Emily looked down at it for a moment. She did not know what to say, but she was not going to let this opportunity pass. She was on the verge of abandoning tact and demanding information when LeeAnn spoke.

"Is all this noble suffering the reason she's your *ex*-wife?"

Emily blessed her.

"It's one of many," Jeff answered.

"Are you going to tell us the others?" LeeAnn asked.

"I would," he returned, "but they're too boring. I suppose the bottom line is that most adults have children the usual way, but there are one or two of us truly insane types who do it by marrying people who refuse to grow up."

LeeAnn smiled over her shoulder at the waiter who was handing her the chicken and peas. Then she looked back at Jeff, "So your wife couldn't find her mittens or remember to look both ways before crossing the street?"

"I don't want to sound disloyal," Jeff answered. "But Britta couldn't even find the street much less be able to cross it by herself."

The whole table had been served and everyone was waiting for Emily to start. She picked up her fork. "So"—she tried to keep her voice as light as Jeff's and LeeAnn's had been—"when you split up, you were the one who crossed the street?"

"Actually not," he answered. "But by then she had found another gentleman to stop traffic for her."

Emily put her fork down, the chicken untasted. "She left you?" There had been enough jokes. This was serious. She had to know. "She left you for someone else?"

Jeff met her gaze; his eyes were flat, expressionless. "Yes. I would never have left her."

Through the silk of her dress, Emily could feel the cool metal back of the V.F.W.'s standard-issue folding chair. Around her people were talking, silverware clinked against china, coffee cups clicked into saucers. She heard the people, she felt the chair, but all she saw were Jeff's brown eyes, the dancing golden lights having drained out of them. It was the first time in six years they had looked at each other directly, and it was only so he could tell her he would never have left his wife.

She heard LeeAnn's voice. "You don't sound broken-hearted."

Jeff turned to face LeeAnn. "I'm not. I wasn't. I had this semiromantic notion of myself as someone who followed through on his commitments. That's why I married her in the first place. The trouble with certain kinds of childlike people is that they make you feel an enormous sense of

responsibility to them even if you don't love them, even if you do have feelings for someone else."

Jeff was looking at LeeAnn, answering LeeAnn's questions, but Emily knew he was talking to her. She could not breathe. Was he saying what she was hearing? *I didn't go back because I loved her, but because I felt obligated, committed.* Was he telling Emily he would have rather stayed with her?

How she wanted to hear that, how she needed to. She had always assumed that he had left because she had been doing something wrong, something that made him love Britta more. It had never before occurred to her that his leaving might not have had anything to do with her.

"How long did your marriage last?"

That was exactly the question Emily wanted to ask, but it had come from Steve. Emily was surprised. She wouldn't have thought him interested in a discussion about people and relationships, but he was sitting forward, his expression concerned, almost urgent.

"Do answer him," LeeAnn was saying to Jeff. "We know some people with problems like that, and they have trouble getting through a three-day weekend together any more."

"Only it's not LeeAnn who has trouble crossing the street," Steve said. "It's me."

"It's not so much crossing the street," LeeAnn said, "as trying to pay on an exact-fare bus with a fifty-dollar bill."

"If that got him an introduction to you," Jeff said, "I'd call it a very successful bus ride."

LeeAnn nodded, acknowledging the compliment.

"You haven't answered Steve's question," Emily pointed out.

"That's because he's not going to like the answer. We'd been married seven and a half weeks when Britta left."

"Seven and a half weeks!" Steve was shocked. "That's not very long."

"No, it's not," Jeff agreed. "Most people get married at the beginning of a relationship; some of us wait until the end."

LeeAnn was shaking her head. "Seven and a half weeks. Did they make you return your wedding presents?"

"No one asked for anything back, and it never occurred to us," he said frankly. "Fortunately we didn't get many."

They had gotten a silver Revere bowl from the Gordon family, and Emily didn't care if it had been put in the Goodwill box. She was thrilled to hear how brief Jeff's marriage had been.

It must have been a complete failure, a little joke, a dud firecracker with a wet fuse fizzing and dying harmlessly. Seven and a half weeks! Emily's heart sang . . . and not because Jeff had been miserable, not because his wife had left him—she was beyond such vengeance. She was thrilled because this news gave her that summer back. Jeff's running home to get married had seemed to cancel it, to assert that his time with her hadn't mattered, hadn't been important. But seven and a half weeks? Something had been restored to her.

Jeff and LeeAnn did most of the talking through the rest of dinner, both of them light and urbane, comfortable being the center of attention. As she listened to them, Emily noticed the tablecloth brushing against the silk of her dress, the ice in her water glass dancing. It was Steve, his foot tapping under the table, his knee pumping up and down with jittery waves of energy. Emily wanted to put her hand on his leg and tell him to calm down.

The waiters were clearing the dessert parfaits, and the banquet organizer rose from the head table and came to the podium to introduce Bobby. Emily supposed that the podium was normally placed on the stage, but the stage could only be reached by stairs. Tonight it was on the floor. She pushed her chair back from the table to avoid Steve's jittering.

The organizer finished his introduction, the audience applauded, and Bobby wheeled his chair out in front of the podium. Waving aside the hand-held microphone, he began his speech.

He first talked a little about himself. He didn't speak about the accident itself, but talked about being disabled. He claimed that what he resented the most about his disability was not what he couldn't do, but how long it took him to do the things that he could. Then he started talking

about the importance of athletics for the physically challenged, adults as well as children.

Emily had heard many, many ex-athletes' after-dinner speeches. It took a lot to impress her, but Bobby Hutchinson succeeded. He was a terrific speaker, dynamic, interesting, entertaining.

Jeff twisted around in his chair, hooking his arm over the back, obviously wanting to talk to her. She leaned forward.

"Did you have any idea that he'd be this good?" he whispered.

She shook her head. Her hair almost brushed his arm; they were that close.

"His commencement speech might have been better than mine."

"I thought the two of you didn't say things like that."

Jeff stifled a laugh, but before he could answer, a lady at the next table let out an angry "shush." They both sat up and exchanged guilty glances just as they had whenever teachers had caught them talking during class.

But the angry woman had a point. Bobby's talk was worth hearing. He was very good. In fact, Emily decided, he could make a living at this . . . at least if he had the right agent, he could.

As soon as his talk was over, she excused herself to the others and hurried up to the front of the room. A number of people were gathered around Bobby, but he caught sight of her and motioned her to come over.

"I'm going to kill that sister of yours," he said.

"Kelly? Why? What's she done?"

"She didn't tell me you worked with Hemphill, that's what. I was thrilled when I heard they were taking a table tonight, but I had no idea you were the one behind it. Now, alas, you're going to see me for the rank opportunist that I am."

Emily did not think the worse of people for taking advantage of opportunities, and she thought a great deal better of Bobby for knowing the sports world well enough to recognize the name of a management agency. "How can we help you?"

"Get some of your clients to endorse our programs . . . for free, of course."

Bobby had plenty of charm. "Our clients will be glad to help," Emily promised confidently. "We'll get you some good names. I think you'll be surprised."

"Great! I love being surprised. And are you going to find someone to pay the media costs?"

Emily laughed. "Oh, Lord, I suppose so, but only if you let us talk to you about tripling your income."

"Tripling my income? I suppose I'd be willing to talk about that."

Emily gave him her card and promised that she and Liz, who booked the speaking circuit, would both be in touch. She said good-bye, then hurried back across the room to her table. People were still milling about, and as short as she was, Emily could not see over their heads. Not until she was nearly at the table did she realize that it was empty. The waiter was removing the white cloth. Kelly and her friends, LeeAnn, Steve, and Jeff were all gone.

She had expected that Kelly would leave with Alex, but Steve, LeeAnn, and Jeff . . . why had they gone? She would have liked to have told LeeAnn that it had been nice to meet her, to have found out more about what Steve was doing, and to have . . . well, to have at least said good-bye to Jeff. Dinner had been so companionable. How could it be over?

Well, she had been the one to run off, but she had had to talk to Bobby. The agency had been paying for the table and so she was obliged to follow up on a potential client.

People were leaving the hall steadily, clustering in the foyer, little groups of three and four saying good-bye, making plans. Emily threaded her way around them, then let someone hold the outer door for her.

Parked near the front of the lot was a new blue van with handicapped plates. Several people were peering through the windows, apparently looking at the hand controls and special lift that would have added thousands and thousands of dollars to the van's price.

"Emily! We're over here."

It was Jeff's voice. She turned eagerly. He was standing with LeeAnn and Steve next to a Cutlass with out-of-state plates and a car rental bumper sticker. She hurried over.

"It was such a pretty night," Jeff called out as she came closer, "that we decided to wait for you out here."

"I was afraid that you'd left," Emily admitted.

"Leave?" Steve said. "Even my manners aren't that bad. I don't suppose I'll write you a thank-you note like LeeAnn will—she always writes them—but I wouldn't walk off without thanking you for dinner."

"Oh, that." Emily waved her hand, dismissing the issue. "It was the agency, not me." She turned to LeeAnn. "And you don't have to write a thank-you note, either to me or the agency."

"When in Rome . . ." LeeAnn answered.

Emily wasn't sure she understood. Why did LeeAnn feel like she was in an alien culture? Yes, she was an Indian, but she certainly didn't seem ill at ease. "Well, you aren't in Rome. Rome is north of Peoria, and Cairo's down south." Illinois had a habit of naming its little towns after exotic places. "We're much closer to Cuba, and I can't imagine Castro spends a lot of time writing thank-you notes. But if you feel compelled to thank me, call me next week and we can gossip." Emily didn't imagine that LeeAnn had any more time for conducting a correspondence than she did. If they didn't talk on the phone, they would never have any contact, and Emily thought that that would be a shame.

"Speaking of gossip," Jeff said, "Steve was just asking about Woody."

"Did you tell them?" When Jeff shook his head, Emily turned to explain to Steve. "It's so exciting. He has his own radio show. It's an oldies show, and he seems to be doing really well."

"Woody's in radio?" Steve sounded pleased. "What's the format? Is it really oldies? Or is it classic hits or classic rock?"

That was too technical for Emily. She had to let Jeff answer.

"They don't seem to have restricted him to a set playlist," he said. "He plays Sam Cook and then the Nineteen Ten FruitGum Company right after each other. Although he hasn't played 'Dock of the Bay' yet . . . that's why I keep listening, to hear that."

Otis Redding's "Dock of the Bay" had always been Jeff's favorite song.

"I thought the whole retrospective programming thing had peaked and was on its way out," LeeAnn said.

"It might be," Jeff answered, "but Woody knows a lot about the music and he does do more than the standard time and temp."

"He tells these little stories," Emily explained. "At least he did once. It was about this poor boy who left his date's homecoming corsage at home, which, I would like to point out, was inspired by the actions of someone standing right here."

"Oh, Steve," LeeAnn sighed. "Did you do that?"

"Who, me?" he protested. "Are you kidding? How could I forget my date's corsage when I didn't speak to a girl throughout high school, much less take one out on a date?"

Emily expected Jeff to step in and take credit for this act, but he remained silent. She looked at him. Even in the half-light of the parking lot, she could see that he looked more serious than she would have expected.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Have you listened in the last few weeks?" he asked.

She shook her head, explaining how busy she had been, how she had taped the show, but had forgotten to bring the tapes with her.

"Then you need to be prepared for the fact"—Jeff was now speaking only to her—"that in the last two weeks or so these little dedications have developed into something pretty elaborate."

"What do you mean?"

"The same people keep coming back. He's developing a pretty solid cast of characters, a little like the old 'Prairie Home Companion' show that was on public radio."

"He'd be good at that. He was always so creative."

"He's not exactly creating these characters."

Jeff's voice was even, too even. "What do you mean," she asked, "not creating them? What are you talking about?"

"Maybe 'creating' is the right word. You can't just spill forth raw autobiographical material, and I suppose creating—"

"Wait a minute," Emily interrupted. "What's this about autobiographical material?"

"That's what he's using. Only it's not only *auto*biographical. You remember Skip and Leslie? Now they're us. It's a straight one-to-one correspondence. Everything Skip's done I've done. Everything Leslie does, you've done. They are us."

"Us?" Emily stared at him. "You and me? Woody talks about us?"

"Your ears aren't pierced evenly, are they?"

Emily's hand instinctively went to her ear. "No, my left one's higher than my right. Do you mean to say . . ."

He nodded. "Leslie—the girl on the show—hers aren't even either. She wanted to quit school rather than show up with her earrings uneven."

Emily stepped back, suddenly sick. In the scheme of things, it was nothing, having one earring higher than the other. She had been through the windshield of a car; she had seen client portfolios drop tens of thousands of dollars in an afternoon; having her earrings uneven now bothered her even less than the scars on her arms.

But at the time . . . when she had come home from the doctor's office and rushed into the bathroom to admire the little gold studs, in that first moment when she had realized that they weren't right, it had been agony.

The pain had been so true, so genuine that even now, even twenty years later, she didn't want people knowing about it . . . or worse, laughing about it.

She stared out across the parking lot. It was too dark to see the meadow that lay beyond the lot, but she knew it was moist ground. In a month or so, the grasses would be sprinkled with the bluish purple blossoms and heart-shaped leaves of butterfly violets. In June would come the white field daisies and perhaps even the deep pink prairie roses.

She tried to speak calmly. "I suppose Woody finds it one big joke." It was one thing to laugh about Jeff's forgetting the corsage. He had remembered in time to go home and get it, but her ears . . . that was different.

"The tone is light," Jeff admitted. "But it's not really ridicule. It's more 'haven't we all been through this?' "

Emily didn't find that comforting.

"Steve's not a character, is he?" LeeAnn asked.

Steve had been lounging against the car. He jerked upright. "No, I wouldn't be. I mean, I—"

"I'm afraid you are," Jeff said. "There's a character named Arnold who plays the violin and is—"

"You're not serious, are you?" Steve's mouth dropped open; he looked horrified. "I'm a character named Arnold?" Jeff nodded. "Oh, my God."

Which was exactly how Emily felt.

* * *

Emily could hardly bear the drive back to Chicago. She had planned to stay in Nancy Hanks most of Sunday, leaving as Woody's show started so she could listen to it on the way home. But since Jeff's revelation, she was desperate to get back to her apartment and listen to the shows she had taped. She went to church with her family and left as soon after Sunday dinner as she could.

It was a four-hour trip, following the Illinois River northwest through Peoria and then on up to 80. This land had once been the tall-grass prairies with waist-high grasses that might, in good years, have grown to nine feet. In another week or so, farmers would start plowing under the stubble of last year's corn.

Just before Joliet, Emily picked up 55 which, as she approached Midway Airport, became the Stevenson Expressway. It was late afternoon when she reached Lake Shore Drive, turning off after the zoo to the garage she rented a block and a half from her apartment. In the dead of winter, when the windchill was twenty, thirty below, that block and a half was a long, hard trek, but on this pretty afternoon in early April, the walk seemed longer than it had ever been.

Finally she was in her apartment. She dropped her suitcase, fumbling for the cassette, fast-forwarding over the opening songs, commercials, looking for what Woody was doing to them.

It was exactly as Jeff had said. Skip, Leslie, and Arnold were all students at Written-in-Stone High School, a medium-size institution in a one-high-school town. There were other characters—teachers and cheerleaders, the Ar-

nold character, a basketball player named Lance—but Emily paid little attention to them, she kept looking for the parts about Leslie.

She found them. Leslie suffering over her unevenly pierced ears, Leslie having to watch the snake in biology lab eat a live mouse—its little tail waving miserably from out of the snake's jaws, the thick bulge of undigested mouse swelling the snake's length. Even now Emily's stomach turned at the memory.

Emily did not remember telling Woody how she had felt about these incidents. Of course, he knew the facts; they were such a close group that everyone knew everything, but she was sure she hadn't confided her feelings to him. He must be down there in Little Rock, reexamining all his memories with an adult's insight. *Emily may have pretended not to mind,* he would have thought, *but she would have hated having her ears pierced wrong.*

The grown-up Emily didn't like this any better. She felt betrayed, more betrayed than she had felt when Quincy Kirkman had signed with ProServ, more betrayed than when she had seen David Stahlberg at a party with a woman she had introduced him to, perhaps even more betrayed than when Jeff Grant had left her to marry someone else. This was so personal, such an exposure.

Then at the end of last week's show, all of Cal Kirkland's listeners learned that Leslie stuffed Kleenex in her bra.

six

It suddenly seemed to Emily as if the whole world was listening to the Cal Kirkland show.

The first thing Monday morning she took Bobby's card to Liz. As he would be a speakers bureau client, it was largely Liz's decision whether or not to take him on.

Liz took his card eagerly, saying she thought she had heard of him. "There's been some talk about a 'guy in the wheelchair' who's a great speaker." She propped the card up against her phone, and Emily knew that she would be talking to Bobby before the day was out.

"Did anything exciting happen over the weekend?" Emily asked.

"Oh, yes. We decided to go to Michael Reese after all."

Emily had intended her question to be about professional matters, but her marathon workfest of the last few weeks had spared her daily updates on Liz's condition so she listened patiently to details of the obstetric facilities at Michael Reese Hospital: candlelight suppers, wallpapered rooms with chair rails and crown moldings, even little packets of designer shampoo.

"Wouldn't it be cheaper to check into the Hyatt?" Emily asked. "Just have your baby there?"

Liz laughed. "I'm sure it would be. By the way, I've been

meaning to ask you, have you been listening to this radio show of Stuart's?"

"Stuart has a radio show?" The attorney who handled Hemphill's clients' endorsement contracts was a lively, talkative man who loved being the center of attention, but Emily couldn't imagine why he would have a radio show . . . unless knowing embarrassing things about Emily Gordon was the sole criterion for deejays these days.

Liz was shaking her head. "No, it's not *his,* but he was the one who found it, and he's been telling everyone about it. He must have said something to you about it, the Cal Kirkland show on WRJR?"

"You're not serious, are you? Stuart's been telling everyone about W— . . . about the Cal Kirkland show?"

"He's been talking about it nonstop. It must be a fantasy of his, to be a deejay. I suppose you were spared because you've been so busy the last couple weeks. But you've *got* to start listening to it. There's this—"

"I've heard it."

"You have? What about that poor girl with her ears being pierced wrong. I almost called you. Yours are like that, aren't they? Did you want to kill yourself when it happened?"

"No," Emily lied. "No, not at all."

"And last night's show . . . was it wonderful? With Lisa —that's her name, isn't it? Lisa?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Well, whatever. That business with her working so hard on that history project, putting her whole heart into it. I couldn't believe it. That's just what I was like. It could have been me."

Yes, Emily thought, *it could have been you. But it was me. That was my project, the one I did, the Hapsburgs were my topic, and yes, I had put my heart into it. I cared so much, it mattered so much.*

It was only high school, Emily reminded herself. Sixteen, seventeen years ago. Who cared anymore? So what if her adolescence was being relived, each stupid, embarrassing thing she had done being described for listeners across the country on Sunday night and discussed in offices Monday morning? Who cared?

She did.

Suddenly Stuart was in Liz's office, and he joined in the conversation, going on and on about Woody's monologues, his characters, his varied playlist.

What if they knew? What if they knew that this Leslie they were talking about was really their professional associate? Think what Stuart would be saying if he knew that. He loved to tease.

And what about all the people she did business with? The men who wanted to talk about the color of her dress instead of return on equity? The professional bowlers, the boxing promoters, the Archie Forresters . . . the first thing they would think of was not how shrewd an investor she was, but that she once stuffed Kleenex in her bra.

What a position Woody had put her in.

Emily stood up, her gesture interrupting Stuart in midrave. "It is a good show. I am enjoying it, but now I'd better get to work."

"Oh, don't go," Stuart pleaded. "I've got good news, domestic news."

Liz jumped up. "Julia's pregnant!"

Emily sat back down. Julia was Stuart's wife, and although Emily did think of herself as "prochildren," she was dismayed at the thought that Julia was pregnant again.

Stuart and Julia already had an eighteen-month-old daughter. Morgan was in a day-care center that closed promptly at six every evening. Julia was a lawyer with a big LaSalle Street firm, and these two parents had carefully apportioned their joint responsibilities. On Tuesdays, Thursdays, and alternate Fridays, Stuart had to leave the office at exactly five-thirty. Liz and Emily had felt that much should be done to support such a model man, and so they had been willing to wait around for late phone calls, even take meetings or go on a few quick trips for him. Emily hadn't minded this when she and Liz were sharing the burden, but during Liz's pregnancy it had become hers alone.

"No," he answered. "It's better than that. We're getting a housekeeper, a genuine, seven-to-seven, pay-overtime-and-she'll-stay-until-midnight housekeeper. No more of this

leaving at five-thirty and going home to do the breakfast dishes."

"That's wonderful." Emily spoke with profound sincerity. "Where on earth did you find her? I thought good housekeepers were impossible to find."

"They are. She's been working for Rick and Alice Colt. The bank is transferring him to Dallas, and Trina doesn't want to go along."

Emily knew Rick Colt. "But didn't they just buy a place? I had lunch with him last month, and he was saying something about moving out to the suburbs. I thought they had already closed and had construction people in there now."

"That's right," Stuart confirmed. "So they're having to put it back on the market without ever moving in. That's why Rick wants you to call him."

"Me?" Emily was surprised. "Why?"

"They're trying not to use a realtor and hoped you might be interested. Apparently you had said something about needing to buy."

"I'm always *saying* things like that," Emily admitted. "But people aren't supposed to take me seriously."

Emily had enough financial sense to know how stupid it was of her to go on renting someone else's condominium, and she did have every intention of having a house someday. In fact, whenever she bought furniture, she tried to get pieces that would work in a den or a family room when she finally got her house. As a result, she owned a great deal of boring furniture.

Nonetheless, she did not intend to buy a house this week. She was still trying to find time to have her hair cut.

Before she could explain this to Stuart, Liz's phone rang. She answered it, then handed it to Emily. "It's Ann Marie."

Ann Marie Ghetti was Emily's secretary. Emily took the phone.

"Roger Swenson is on the line," Ann Marie told her.

Emily frowned. "Who's he?"

"He said it was personal."

That explained why Ann Marie forwarded the call to Liz's office, instead of taking a message. Ann Marie—and Ann Marie's very Italian mother—thought Emily ought to get

married. Ann Marie was not married either, but as Ann Marie was twenty and Emily thirty-four, Mrs. Ghetti thought that Emily's case was more desperate.

"How personal could it be if I don't remember the name?" Emily asked. "But ask him to hold for another second. I'll take it in my office." She waved good-bye to Stuart and Liz, hurried down the hall, and picked up the phone. "Hello, this is Emily Gordon."

"Oh, Emily, good, I'm glad you're in," a man's voice said. "I wanted to let you know I'll probably be fifteen minutes late tonight."

"Tonight?"

"Yes, we were meeting at Capra's tonight at seven." He paused. "You hadn't forgotten, had you?"

"Goodness, no." Emily fumbled under some papers for her calendar. There it was—*Roger Swenson, seven o'clock, Capra's.* Capra's was a new restaurant. Good God, this must be a date.

She didn't want to go on a date tonight. She wanted to go home, do her laundry, and read a month's worth of mail.

But as much as she disliked the fact that every night Ann Marie went home to tell her mother that another day had passed without Miss Gordon getting married, as much as she truly hated the notion that Great-Aunt Tilda was hoarding a tablecloth and bedspread not to be acquisitioned until the wedding march played, Emily did want to be married someday. She wanted a house, she wanted children. She had always assumed that she would someday have a life like her mother's. It was in the contract she had with life; it was guaranteed.

Of course, the fine print on that contract said that to get to the house and the kids, you had to date. No matter how tired you were, how much work, laundry, or shopping you needed to do, when a man called, you had to go out.

"So you want to make it seven-fifteen?" she said to Roger Swenson now. "That's fine with me."

"I'm looking forward to it."

"I am too."

Who on earth was Roger Swenson?

* * *

Emily arrived at Capra's at seven-twenty, a careful five minutes late. She had by then remembered that Roger Swenson was an account executive with Leo Burnett, the big advertising agency, but she couldn't remember what he looked like. She stood in the doorway for a moment, hoping that some man would pop up, acting thrilled to see her. None did.

She left her name with the hostess and sat down to wait. At seven-thirty, she opened her attaché case, getting something to read. At seven-forty the hostess brought her a message that Mr. Swenson would be arriving at seven-thirty. At eight-fifteen, the hostess brought another message, saying he would be there at eight.

"It's nice of you to wait like this," the hostess said. She was a woman about Emily's age, and she too had no ring on her left hand.

"No, it isn't," Emily answered. "It's stupid."

Did Jeff keep women waiting like this? Emily couldn't imagine that he did.

At eight-twenty-three, Roger Swenson arrived, full of brisk apologies. The hostess had long since given their table away and so directed them into the dark bar. She said she might be able to seat them within half an hour, but she didn't sound very hopeful.

They sat down in the low club chairs, and ordered drinks. The chairs were designed for tall people. Emily had to sit forward if her feet were to touch the floor. It was uncomfortable.

They began the usual date chat. They talked about the Cubs, they talked about Helmut Jahn architecture, they talked about the latest movie set in Chicago, but mostly they talked about Roger Swenson. Emily asked him questions about himself; he seemed to be completely uninterested in her.

"So do you like working at Burnett?"

"Sure. I've been on some great accounts. I started on Morris the cat and since then, there's been some really hot stuff. This microwave soup thing, that's going to be it. Cans are finished, they're history."

Emily thought about her clients. The figure skater Andrea Dana, Darrell Johnson, a light heavyweight contender—

they were "really hot" too. Roger Swenson could ask about them.

"So are you from the Chicago area?" she asked.

"No, I'm a Missouri boy. St. Louis, in fact. But I came out here for school, went to Northwestern."

I'm from downstate, Emily didn't answer. Hadn't her mother always told her that boys like a good listener? *And I went to U. of C.* "What part of the city are you living in now?"

"Lake Point Tower."

I'm not far from there. I've got a place in Belmont Harbor. "Do you like high-rise living?" *I don't. My building only has ten units, which I like, but of course, in your high rise you have a doorman and parking below the building. That would be nice.*

"I like it fine," he answered. "I've got my eye on something in One Magnificent Mile."

Emily did not believe that. He might have his eye on it, but wishing didn't get you into One Magnificent Mile. Money did. Nonetheless Emily said what she knew he wanted her to say. "So you're doing well for yourself." *But I've got a pretty good idea of what you make. It's a fine income, but I'm doing better.*

"I can't complain, I can't complain."

Well, Emily could. This was incredibly boring. Roger droned on, his answers to her increasingly perfunctory questions getting increasingly longer. Surely Jeff Grant didn't do this to the women he took to dinner.

Wouldn't you like to hear about me? About how ambivalent I feel about my friends at work having children? About how I know there's something wrong with my life, but I don't know what it is? I need someone to talk to. Or if you don't want to hear about me, how about my friends? I met this interesting Native American woman . . .

But, no. Roger Swenson did not want to hear about her.

Or, it seemed, even to look at her. He had started glancing over his shoulder. He would say something, then look over his shoulder at the door leading to the dining room. He did it again and again.

Emily shifted in the uncomfortable chair. She was puzzled. People were coming into the bar for after-dinner

drinks. Maybe he was trying to figure out when a table would be available. She watched him for another minute . . . then understood.

Oh, great. Here he had brought her out on the one night her hairstylist worked late, then had kept her waiting for sixty-three minutes, hadn't shown the least interest in her, and now he was sitting here, checking out all the women who walked into the bar. That's why he was looking at the door; he was looking at other women.

"Do you get back to St. Louis much?" she asked.

"Only at Christmas," he said, then glanced over his shoulder. "My family's pretty spread out."

How did he know exactly when to look? He always hit it, turning just as the door opened. There must be some sort of draft.

Perhaps she should offer to change places with him. He was going to get a crick in his neck.

Draft, turn, look. Draft, turn, look.

Why was she here? There was no way she would let any professional acquaintance treat her like this. She would never wait an hour for a business lunch, not ever. And this kind of inattention—a client would have to have at least three Olympic golds before he could get away with this. One or two medals and the interview would be over so fast that Emily would deserve a gold for herself.

In her job, it helped to be pleasant, it helped to be charming, but it was more important to let people know that certain things could not occur, that there were lines that could not be crossed. She was good at that. At least in her job she was. Her personal life, now there was another story. On everything except sex—and even that sometimes—she let men get away with too much. What single woman didn't? For all you knew, one of those jerks might turn out to be Mr. Right, and in hopes of that, you groveled and demeaned yourself.

But if Roger Swenson looked at the door once more, she was leaving.

A stir of air circled her shoulder. She watched Roger carefully. But he didn't know that because his head was starting to turn.

She reached for her purse, took out a five to cover her drink. He was watching her by now, startled, puzzled. She stood up, dropped the bill on the table, and without saying a single word, walked out.

A cab was at the curb, discharging a young couple. She nodded to the driver, got in, and gave him her address. A rip in the back seat had been mended with duct tape, just as in the cab she had taken home from O'Hare the night she had first heard Woody on the radio, although it was not the same car, not even the same taxi company.

Woody's show might be embarrassing—worse than embarrassing, it was threatening, dangerous—but it reminded her of one thing. Dating used to be fun. She would see Jeff every day at school, talk to him on the phone every night during the week, but it was still exciting to be waiting in the living room on Saturday, dressed up, listening for his car.

Dating wasn't fun anymore. After fifteen minutes, the men always started talking about their divorces and never asked you about yourself. They didn't care. You were the mother, the therapist. Everything was serious; everything was about relationships from the start.

Emily dated more than any single professional woman that she knew. Of course, she met more men than most women; her job really was good that way. But her dating so much was no lucky accident. "Oh, I'm a plodder," she would laugh when asked about it. "When I want something, I put one foot in front of the other until I get it."

But would any amount of plodding through evenings like this turn her into her sister, twenty-one and picking out china patterns? She had friends who had given up, who just didn't bother any more, and sometimes she envied them. It would be nice to go to a party and not feel like she had to work so hard.

So take some time off.

She sat up. That was a new thought. Not quit, not give up hope, just take some time off; like the summer, she could take the summer off. From now until Labor Day—three and a half months—she wouldn't date.

"I'm sorry," she would say when each potential Mr. Right called, "I'm not dating this summer. I have an alter ego on

the radio who's doing it for me. Please call back after Labor Day. The Great American Husband Hunt is starting up again in the fall."

It was a good feeling, deciding not to date, but it wasn't enough. Emily, being Emily, had to have something *to* do. So when she got home that evening, she picked up the phone and called Rick Colt about his house.

seven

Tuesday afternoon Emily drove out to Wilmette, one of the old, Establishment suburbs north of the city, traditionally populated by well-off Protestants. The Colts' house was east of Green Bay Road in a beautiful neighborhood, full of deep, shaded lawns and big houses that had been built in the 1880s with Italianate detailing. The Colts' home, the only small one on the block, was built in the thirties. A soft gray bungalow with a veranda across the front, a wide dormer in the attic, and fresh white shutters, it looked like a little dollhouse tucked among the oaks and maples that shaded the backyard. Two river birches graced the front. A wide flagstone walk curved through the lawn, and low-growing Andorra juniper circled a wrought iron lamppost at the curb.

Inside, it had two small bedrooms and a bathroom on the main level, a new master suite in the attic, and a finished basement with a third full bathroom. "The place was a mess when we bought it," Alice Colt said as she showed Emily around. "We've had contractors in here for three months."

That was clear. The oak floor in the long room that was both living room and dining room had been sanded and freshly stained; there were built-in bookcases on either side of the fireplace. The two bedrooms on the main level were

already carpeted in a Williamsburg blue. The master suite in the attic had skylights, a sitting area, and an elegant new bathroom. The basement was finished with white drywall, not the dark cardboard paneling that people used to put in basements.

But it had all the charm of an old house. Some of the rooms had curves where the plaster walls met instead of right-angled corners. The interior doorknobs were glass, cut into squat little diamond shapes that fit perfectly into Emily's small hand. The attic dormer formed a little alcove just right for two comfortable chairs and a bookcase.

Of course, it was not perfect. The stairs to the attic bedroom were narrow and startlingly steep, and the stairs to the basement family room were in the garage. There weren't any electric outlets on the exterior walls. There was nowhere to hang guests' coats. If someone was coming down the attic stairs at the same time someone else came out of the back bedroom, the two doors would collide.

Worst of all was the kitchen; it was still the Depression-era original. The pine cabinets were so narrow that they would barely hold dinner plates; their handles were boxy metal latches with little knobs that had to be turned each time someone opened a cabinet. The sink was a massive cast-iron thing covered with scratched white porcelain. Drainboards sprawled out on either side and two faucets were mounted high on the backsplash. The single-door refrigerator, while it did not have a compressor on the top, was so old that it didn't have a separate freezer, only a small compartment with a thin metal door that would, when defrosted, hold two ice cube trays and a pound of hamburger.

"If you think this is bad," Alice Colt said, "turn around."

Emily did. Built into the wall near the door to the side yard was a dinette booth, the kind that had long since been taken out of every lunch counter in the Midwest. Two benches, upholstered in gray and yellow vinyl, flanked a metal-rimmed table that was flecked with gray and yellow.

It was the ugliest thing Emily had ever seen in her life, and she fell in love, hopelessly, blindly, desperately in love, not just with the kitchen and the booth, but with the whole house.

And it had been a long, long time since Emily Gordon had been in love.

But the house was in the suburbs, and Emily couldn't live in the suburbs. The suburbs were for married people; she would be lonely and isolated if she moved into a neighborhood full of families. Looking around the living room once more, touching the glass-fronted bookcases, regretfully she told Alice Colt that it was a charming house, a sweetheart of a place, absolutely delightful, but not right for her. "I'm sorry that I've wasted your time."

Alice waved her hand. "Don't worry about it."

Emily drove back to the city, watching as rush-hour traffic gathered on the other side of the Drive—all the dads going home to their families in the suburbs. The world seemed divided into people who had children and those who did not. The nice, generous, thoughtful people who did; the self-centered, rigid ones who did not.

It wasn't that her life in the city was all that great. She hardly knew the people in her building; most of her information about them was limited to what she heard coming through the walls. Even if she lived in the suburbs, how could she be more lonely and isolated than she already was? And as long as that was her fate, why not live in a place where her garage was on the other side of her kitchen door, not a block and a half away? Why not have her own yard, her own trees and flowers, instead of sharing parks with the leavings of other people's dogs? Why not shop in grocery stores that had parking lots? Why not live in a place where she wouldn't need to worry about being mugged?

There was much Emily loved about the city, the energy of its crowded streets, the towering grace of the skyscrapers, the sun sparkling off the waves on the lake, the impatient whistles of the Irish traffic cops. She loved Chicago's variety: the old German restaurants serving dark beer and dark bread; the deep-dish pizza places. She liked the way the shining lakefront and the wealthy Near North gave way to the West Side's sprawl of warehouses, muffler shops, and endless rows of brick three-flats. She relished daily theater provided by local politics. How she would miss all that if she left the city.

But she wouldn't be going all that far; Wilmette wasn't

Nancy Hanks. She'd still be working in the city. She could still shop along the Magnificent Mile, she could still eat in the stylish restaurants of the Near North, she could still get a decent pizza. She could still read the *Tribune,* still listen to Walter Jacobsen on the evening news, and there was not a chance that her exodus to the suburbs would turn City Hall into a calm, respectable place.

This decision was, she realized as she turned into her garage, more than a matter of where she was going to sleep and eat. She was tired of waiting. For years and years, she had had this notion that someday her life was suddenly going to get better, that someday she would have a house, real china, pretty wallpaper, and interesting furniture; someday she would put on dinner parties and have houseguests . . . someday she would be married.

She forced herself to admit it, that's what she had been waiting for. That's why she didn't have a house, why she didn't go on proper vacations, why she spent her money on clothes instead of antique end tables—all this because she wasn't married. She had put huge chunks of her life on hold, waiting to be married.

Back in her apartment, she tried to sort through the mail; she tried to do the laundry, but all she could think about was the house, about its little glass doorknobs, about the beautifully finished basement. She kept seeing herself coming down the attic steps in the morning, having her coffee on the flagstone terrace. She looked around her apartment, at the severe lines of her teak furniture, at the bare tabletops, the nearly empty walls. Adults were not supposed to live like this; this was not a home.

Emily had pretty fantasies so rarely that she had no defense against them. Her only hope was her calculator. She sat down at her desk, found a mortgage table, verified her impression of the current interest rate, and ran the numbers, trusting that their clear, hard-edged truth would drive away these visions of the patterns sunlight casts on a shaded lawn.

They didn't. Of course, she would be paying more than she did now even after factoring in the relief at tax-time. But she could afford it. There was no way the smallest house on the block in Wilmette could ever be a bad investment, and

even if it was, this wasn't the money she had been saving to give herself a nice burial.

She took a breath and picked up the phone. She dialed; Rick Colt answered.

"Your bank is transferring you unexpectedly," she said. "Are they going to sweeten the financing on your house?"

* * *

Emily's friends and colleagues couldn't believe it. None of them lived in the suburbs, and only those with babies ever planned to. Evanston, Oak Park, Western Springs, Skokie seemed a cultural wasteland full of shopping malls and schools. Their sneers made Emily jittery and defensive.

But Emily's parents were thrilled, and whenever Emily felt overwhelmed by what she was doing, her parents' absorption in the practical details of home owning calmed her down. She spoke to them almost every day. Their neighbors were selling a lawn mower; did Emily want it? What about storm windows? Jim could get self-storing triple-tracks at cost; did she need them? What about furniture? Did she have enough? Did she want to trade dining room sets with her grandmother?

"Trade dining room sets with her?" Emily asked. "Why would she want to do that?" Grandma Postle had a turn-of-the-century burl walnut table with eight chairs and a breakfront that had glass-fronted doors and beveled mirrors. Emily's dining room set was a Scandinavian import: four teak chairs with seats of earth-toned tweedy upholstery, and a round teak table whose legs she had had to bolt on herself. She had bought it not because she liked it, but because it had seemed safe, something that could be used anywhere once she got married and had her house.

"Her set is really too big now that she's in the apartment," Glenda had explained. "She thought about giving it to Kelly, but then she didn't know what she'd do for a table."

"She couldn't buy one?"

"She didn't want to."

Grandma Postle wasn't getting older, she was getting cheaper.

"But," Glenda continued, "she doesn't want to do it

unless you have six chairs. She needs six chairs. I said I was sure you did have six."

"Well, I don't. I mean, I don't *now,*" Emily added hastily. She wasn't going to have burl walnut and beveled mirrors pass her by for the want of two teak chairs with boring upholstery. "But I will by then."

That evening after work, she went out to Scandinavian Design to see if she could match her chairs. She couldn't, not without waiting at least twelve weeks, so she bought six altogether new chairs for her grandmother and, as long as she was at it, a new table.

So at last Emily was going to do what she had been planning to do for years and years, put some of her useful, bland go-with-everything furniture into a family room. The next day, she skipped lunch, went to Marshall Field's, and picked out china, crystal, and silver patterns.

* * *

Val Churchill was sorry that she hadn't brought her turquoise sweater. Spencer Margolin was outraged that he'd already seen the transatlantic movie. Brian Orb couldn't find his traveler's checks. Caitlin Henniker didn't feel well.

And they were still waiting in the ticket line at O'Hare. The flight for Switzerland didn't leave for another two hours—or, more important, the flight *home* from Switzerland didn't leave for another two weeks.

Val, Spencer, Brian, and Caitlin were four of the eight high school students about to set off for two weeks in Europe with Jeff Grant who, lucky person that he was, was the sole adult chaperone for them. He had done this before and so knew that this was hardly the most pleasant way to travel, but teachers made even less than reporters. For Jeff, it was the only way to travel.

He ignored Val and Spencer, but spoke to Caitlin comfortingly. The airlines were used to people being sick, he said. It was nothing. She could get an aisle seat. There were rest rooms, there were air sickness bags. Yes, he could understand that she would be embarrassed, but airplanes were so crowded and noisy that people wouldn't even notice.

Brian Orb, so habitually careless that he reminded Jeff of

Woody, was a different matter. Jeff wasn't about to comfort Brian; his parents had done too much of that already. American Express had an office in Geneva, Jeff told him. If Brian had brought the numbers of his checks, he could spend tomorrow morning—while the rest of them were taking a boat across the lake—replacing them.

"The numbers?" Brian looked blank. "But they're with the checks."

"Then you aren't going to have a very good time."

Jeff had a clear notion of his role on these trips. He was to keep these eight adolescents safe and behaving according to Nancy Hank's moral standards—no alcohol or drugs and as little sex as possible. This he did for Nancy Hanks, for the travel agency paying his expenses, and for his own reputation.

What he did for the kids was quite different. He forced them to manage on their own. He refused to make things easy or convenient. They had to carry their own passports, their own tickets. They had to figure out how long it would take to get from the hotel to the train station, and if they missed the train and had to sit on the platform all night, well, that wasn't any fun, but it was the sort of mistake that only got made once a trip . . . perhaps only once in a lifetime.

The only trouble with these valuable lessons in self-reliance was that Jeff too got to sit on the train platform all night. He tried to view it as another form of grading papers.

By the time the baggage had been checked, Val was worried that she hadn't brought enough panty hose, Brian had found his traveler's checks, and the process of copying the numbers of her checks onto six different pieces of paper had settled Caitlin's stomach.

Jeff followed them down to the international departure lounge. He liked the kids; even at 3:00 A.M. on a train platform, he liked them. But there was always a moment just before these trips began, when he wondered how he was going to endure two weeks without talking to another adult.

He glanced at his watch. There was still plenty of time before boarding. Just across the concourse was a bank of phones. He was in Chicago; so was Emily. He could call her, one last contact with the adult world.

It would be a little awkward. If Woody ever had to answer for his assorted sins, Jeff would want one of them to be the way that the news about his radio show had cut short Jeff's last conversation with Emily. That night in the V.F.W. parking lot, she and Steve had both been so stunned that they could do nothing more than mumble farewells. None of them had made plans to see each other again.

After Britta had left him, Jeff had choked back the impulse to call Emily, telling himself that the just and honorable course of action was to let her go on hating him. That was the gentlemanly thing to do. Only a slug, a selfish, insecure worm of a fellow, needed to have the good opinion of every woman who had ever cared about him.

But, he argued to himself now, Emily had made the first step. She had come to school; she had invited him to sit with her at that dinner; she had called when good old Skip had forgotten the corsage. These were not the actions of a woman who still hated. How she did feel about him, Jeff didn't know . . . and he was, he had to admit, interested in finding out.

So with the sinking feeling that must come when a man realizes that he is not a gentleman, but a slug, an insecure and selfish worm of a fellow, Jeff went over to the phones. He squinted, trying to remember the name of the agency she worked for. When "Hemphill" shot to the top of his brain, he picked up the receiver to call directory assistance. Then he heard his name.

"Mr. Grant, Mr. Grant." It was Spencer Margolin. "I was thinking . . . a sign says that there's a currency-exchange place around here somewhere. Wouldn't it be easier if we changed some of our money now?"

Jeff hung up the phone. Here was behavior to be encouraged.

* * *

Any phone call to Emily's office would not have found her. That Friday afternoon was moving day. The packers had come on Thursday, sure-fingered Hispanic women who knew their bosses charged by the carton. Hence, they swaddled everything Emily owned, from her glassware to

her shoes and half-empty can of Comet cleanser, in sheet after sheet of crumpled paper. On Friday, three burly men whisked these paper-filled boxes into their van and followed Emily's BMW out to Wilmette.

Within an hour, a station wagon with an extension ladder strapped to the roof pulled up to the curb and a rented moving van backed into the drive. Emily's parents were in the station wagon, Kelly and Alex in the van.

They loved the house, from the Andorra juniper at the curb to the forsythia at the back lot line. "I don't suppose this is the guest bathroom, is it?" Kelly said at the sight of the leaded glass window and whirlpool tub in the attic bathroom.

"You could use a little more caulking around the dryer vent," Jim said after a tour of the foundation. "But it looks like the basement is dry."

"You need to have your father build you some sort of counter space here," Glenda said, standing in front of the stove. "There's nowhere to set a saucepan."

"No, you need to have him build one of those wall jukeboxes," Alex said from inside the yellow-and-gray vinyl café booth. "But then you'd have to have Coke and french fries for breakfast."

Jim stuck his head in the kitchen. "I'm going up on the roof. Does anyone want to come?"

Alex jumped up eagerly, but Emily forwent this expedition to supervise the movers unloading the last boxes. She paid them, giving them something extra to unload Grandma Postle's dining room set out of the rented van. Glenda didn't approve of this plan; Jim and Alex had loaded the furniture, they could unload it too. But, Emily noticed, her father didn't object when he heard of the arrangement.

Then Glenda organized them all. Jim and Alex were to put up curtain rods, hang pictures, hook up the stereo and the TV, and carry out the empty boxes and mountains of paper. Kelly was to unpack the books and records. Emily was assigned to her clothes and the medicine cabinets. Glenda herself would unpack the kitchen and then make up the beds.

"Have you found any glasses?" Emily came into the

kitchen some time after all this activity started. "I'd love something to—" She broke off. "Oh, what pretty shelf paper! Where did it come from?"

"I brought it up," Glenda answered. "People always seem to forget to buy shelf paper on moving day, which means you can't unpack the kitchen until you go out and get some. Do you like it? I also brought plain white in case you didn't. I was about to come ask you which you preferred. Now what do you want to drink?"

Emily had indeed forgotten about shelf paper. She had forgotten about shelf paper every time she had ever moved, and as a result had never had a kitchen with any in it. In fact, had she seen these rolls of flower-sprigged paper in the hands of anyone but her mother, she would have mistaken them for gift wrap. "Use the blue. It's lovely. What do I want to drink? There's only water, isn't there?"

"No, I think Alex brought the cooler in."

Emily opened her aging refrigerator. Stored in it were a quart of orange juice, a six-pack of beer, a liter of Diet Coke, a carton of eggs, a pound of bacon, two loaves of homemade bread, and a Corning Ware casserole dish.

Glenda Gordon never traveled without food. Her husband carried ladders and tools; she carried food. Whenever she went to visit Wyatt and his family in Davenport, she took four loaves of her bread, a couple batches of cookies, a two-quart jar of patio salad, and a ham.

Emily took the Coke out of the icebox. Her mother had already rinsed out a glass. Emily let Glenda fill it with ice and Coke, then took it slowly, resentfully.

Emily appreciated her family coming to help, she really did. By Sunday night, she would be completely unpacked; she could have never managed that on her own. But there was a cost—her mother was in charge. Emily was a daughter in her own house. True, she hadn't packed a picnic when she had gotten up this morning, but she had thought about what her family would eat. She had picked up the carryout menus from the local Chinese restaurant and the pizza parlor.

They had sandwiches for lunch and the casserole for dinner. After she had put it in the oven, Glenda rummaged through a box, looking for the place mats. Setting the table

struck Emily as a needless eccentricity, but she kept her mouth shut . . . largely because she was too tired to open it. Jim had already gone into the guest bedroom to find out, he said, if the bed was level.

"Now since it's your first dinner in your new house," Glenda said briskly, "do you want to use your china?"

That would be nice. "But I only bought two settings."

"Actually you have plenty of dinner plates."

"What are you talking about?"

Glenda pointed to a corner of the kitchen. There were three boxes sitting by the café booth, two big square ones, one flat and rectangular.

"Mother!"

"The china's for your housewarming, the crystal's for your birthday, and the silver is for Christmas, but your dad said we should give them all to you now."

"Mother!"

"It's nice to have pretty things. I don't know why we didn't think to have you get them earlier. I guess—"

"Mother, this is too much, really it is."

"You girls aren't fighting, are you?" It was Jim, returning from his nap.

"Dad, this china . . . it's much too much."

"Sweetheart, do you have any idea what we're spending on Kelly this summer?"

"Yes, but—"

Jim put his arm around her neck, clamping one hand over her mouth. "Have I ever told you about the first time I saw you?"

Emily softened. He had, many times. Her real father had died from polio when she was five months old. Jim had met her mother six months later, then had married her the next year, adopting Emily.

"I didn't know what to expect," he said, his arm still around Emily. "I was uncomfortable with the notion that Glenda had already been married, that she had a child. I didn't want to meet you, I wanted you to disappear, not to be But then I saw you, all dressed up in a pink dress and you had a little bonnet on because you didn't have any hair. I was in love with you long before I loved her."

Emily touched her father's face. "Then she has a lot to thank me for." She looked over at her mother, who had taken the china out of the box and was starting to rinse it.

At twenty-one, Glenda had been a mother and a widow. She had taken Emily back to her own parents' house. Emily remembered nothing of those days, but in recent years she had seen her mother and her grandmother work in a kitchen together. Whenever the health-conscious Glenda turned her back, Grandma Postle dumped salt into everything.

"When you moved back with Grandma," Emily asked, "was that hard?"

Glenda looked up from the sink. "What do you mean, hard?"

"To go from having your own home to being a daughter again—wasn't that hard?"

"I suppose it was hard, but I had you." Glenda went back to work. "Things can get pretty bad, but if you have a healthy baby . . . and you were always healthy. I was so afraid that you'd get it, polio, I mean." And for a moment, Glenda, who was always busy, always doing six things at once, let her hands go still. "From the time David got sick, from then on, the only time I remember crying was the day you were vaccinated. I actually wrote that doctor, Dr. Salk, the one whose vaccine it was, I wrote him a letter. I wanted him to know, to know what that shot of his meant to me, to all the mothers who had been afraid to let their children go outside. I didn't know where to send it so I mailed it to Mrs. Eisenhower at the White House. I thought she would know where he was."

Emily stared at her mother. Glenda had written Dr. Salk; that wasn't like her, not at all. Emily felt her eyes start to burn.

Glenda had been a toddler during the Depression, a young teenager during the war, a bride during the polio epidemic. And her daughter had once thought that she didn't have enough to worry about.

Horrified at herself, Emily touched her mother's arm. "Mother, I love you."

"I know." Glenda patted her cheek. "Now why don't you start unpacking the crystal? We'll have to rinse it too."

* * *

"Are you going to be all right?" Jim asked Emily as the family was preparing to leave Sunday afternoon.

"I'll be fine," Emily answered, wondering what lengths he would go to if she answered otherwise. "Just fine. I've got a new ladder. What more do I need?"

Besides the china, crystal, and silver, Jim Gordon was giving his daughter a ladder.

"I'm going to have the willies upside-down and backward the first time I have to stay in our house alone," Kelly volunteered. "I'll stay awake all night listening for the ax murderer."

"I'm used to living alone," Emily answered. "The ax murderer's already had a decade or so to get me."

"Girls!" Glenda turned to reprove them. "How can you talk like that?"

"Don't worry, Mother. I'll be all right."

But as the evening light faded, as she went around locking the doors, turning out the lights, looking at the black glass in the uncurtained windows, the house didn't feel like home yet, and she was grateful for the familiar sound of Woody's rich baritone on the radio.

Skip and Leslie were younger this week, and the music was pre-Beatles. They were little kids wanting, wanting more than anything, to be teenagers. It would be ten o'clock and you would have been in bed for an hour and a half, the light from the bathroom creeping into your half-open door. Your older sister would be down the hall, sitting at her desk, finishing her homework, listening to the radio. And all those wonderful sounds would come into your bedroom with the bathroom light, calling to you from the teenage world, a world of saddle shoes, bobby socks, and Cokes, of letters sealed with a kiss and Connie Francis and Elvis, sounds that would leave you limp with envy, certain that everything, simply everything, would be better when you were older.

And Emily knew that until six weeks ago, she had been like that, always waiting for the times to get better, for that magic event that would suddenly make everything right. Well, she was done waiting for it to happen to her; she was making it happen for herself.

"But what's she leaving for a husband to do?" her secretary Ann Marie's mother had asked on hearing that

Emily was buying a house for herself. "She's not giving up hope, is she?"

No, she wasn't giving up hope. There was still plenty for a husband to do. He could waste time on Sunday afternoon with her, he could listen to her talk about her family, he could father children. He just didn't need to sign the mortgage.

* * *

Coming home each night during the next week was an adventure. Emily had been determined that she was not going to spend the next four years with bare floors, blank walls, and empty windows. Although her mother had never used an interior decorator, she had met with Alice Colt's decorator . . . and right away learned that she was supposed to call the woman a designer. She also discovered that her preference for clear, cool colors was close enough to Alice's that there was no need to cancel all the orders for wallpaper and floor coverings. Emily might have chosen apricot instead of peach, pale violet instead of periwinkle, but she knew if she had to start from scratch, it would take her forever to decorate the house and she would rather have peach and periwinkle than nothing at all.

She had been blunt with the designer—she wasn't going to stay home and wait for deliveries and workmen; what were her options? The designer looked blank—clearly things were easier when there was a wife to stay home. Well, there wasn't one in this house, Emily had answered. And two days later the designer had provided the number of a service that provided "wives" for short-term rental. They would run errands, mail packages, buy and wrap birthday presents, load up the freezer. Sitting around waiting for deliveries came at their cheapest rate. Glenda would have a fit if she knew that any daughter of hers would use such a service, but Glenda wasn't going to know about it. And so a nice grandmotherly soul, properly bonded and insured, appeared Monday morning to spend the week at Emily's, crocheting and answering the doorbell.

So each evening, Emily returned to something new—wallpaper, paint, carpets, curtains. It was wonderful how

easy it was. It was also wildly expensive, from the rented wife on up, but Emily didn't care. She had opened a new checking account, depositing in it what she could afford to spend on the house this year. She was determined to spend every dime before the summer was through. Once she saw how well her grandmother's furniture suited the house, she decided to buy new living room furniture, banishing all the teak to the family room.

She couldn't get over how easy life in the suburbs was. Her commute was longer, but she always got a seat on the train and she had never gotten one on the bus. She could buy potted plants and new pillows without having to wonder how she was going to get them from her car up the elevator to her door.

One set of neighbors brought her a loaf of banana bread, another wrote her a note, a third invited her in for drinks. They were all families or retired couples, but on the lot that backed hers, the man was a night editor at the *Sun-Times*, so his wife was happy to chat with Emily when her children were playing in the yard after dinner.

In the morning, she would sit in her breakfast booth with a cup of coffee and the newspaper, watching the sun stream into the room, making patterns on the floor. In the evening she would sit on the little flagstone patio in the backyard, listening to the crickets.

She thought about what the house would be like in the early spring when the back lot line would blaze golden yellow with the blossoms of the arching forsythia. Then as the sun grew warmer, the gracefully drooping branches of the bridalwreath would shine white, and the little P.J.M. rhododendrons would flower a lavender-blue. In the fall, the dense crown of her sugar maples would flame a deep red, and the shiny leaves of the river birch would turn butter gold.

She had a party, inviting everyone from the agency. People brought spouses or dates; she had twenty-two guests. She had never done anything like that before.

The women all loved the house. "This dormer would be perfect for a little bassinet," Liz exclaimed.

"And an eat-in kitchen," Stuart's wife, Julia, sighed.

"How we need that. Morgan's dropping soggy Cheerios all over the dining room Tabriz. But Stuart would never move out of the city."

"Neither would Mason," Liz said. "He says he doesn't care where we live so long as it's a co-op and he can walk to work."

Mason himself said little, as did Stuart.

Halfway through the evening, Emily went down to the basement to get another bag of ice out of the deep freeze. Her boss followed her. Crispin Hemphill was a handsome man in his late fifties, tanned, with thick, silver hair.

"I do like your house," he said as she flipped on the light to the utility room. "But I trust you wouldn't expect me to say so if I were still in my thirties."

Stuart, Mason, and all the other men who had said little about Emily's house were in their thirties. Emily opened the freezer. "Why do you say that?"

"It is a little emasculating, you know, this notion that a woman can get all this on her own. Thank God when I was that age, women couldn't do it."

He was smiling, and Emily dropped the bag of ice in his arms. "What pigs you men are," she said.

And indeed it was deplorable that men should be threatened by a woman's economic independence. But as long as they were going to feel that way, Emily was secretly pleased to be the one causing it.

Her decision to move had been as mad an impulse as she was ever likely to have. Several times before doing it, she had woken in the middle of the night, wondering if she had gone completely and finally bonkers. The numbers would reassure her; even if this was wrong socially, psychologically, and logistically, it was right financially. She might not be doing a good job managing the rest of her life, but she had done fine with the money.

But now that she was settled, with paper on her walls and curtains in her windows, she felt calm and strong. This house was not an investment; it was her home. She had done the right thing.

eight

Leslie never sees Skip after fourth period. It's the one time of the day they don't see each other. He's in the new wing, going between German and government, and she comes out of the gym and goes to French. So Leslie walks to French with Karen, and they talk about what they are going to do over the weekend, what they are going to wear, and one day they are going down the stairs, and Leslie's thinking about Karen's new sweater—it's a pink mohair, a cardigan with grosgrain ribbon down the front—and she's thinking about that sweater and not the stairs. They are coming down, and when they are almost at the bottom, when they reach the last stair, the little heel of her black Capezio catches, and she falls.

Right in front of everyone. She's on her hands and knees, and people have to move around her, and they are all looking down at her, staring at her, laughing at her. Her French book has dropped face down and her homework has slid across the floor, and a senior steps on it, crunching it with his loafers. Her purse is open and her pen has rolled under the radiator. She can see a bit of blue far off to the left corner. That's her pen, but she's not going to get it. She won't be able to take notes in French, but she's not going to crawl across the landing, fumble under the school radiator, and get it.

There's a run in her stocking. She's going to have to go to

French with no pen and a run in her stocking. People are going to be talking about her all day. She wants to die; she wants to move out of town. This is the worst thing that has ever happened.

Emily never got personal mail. She never wrote any so it was understandable that she never got any. But one Monday about three weeks after she had moved into the house, she found among the bills and catalogs a thin blue international letter.

It was from Jeff.

She had been wondering if she was going to hear from him. Certainly she was planning on calling him when she went home for the Fourth of July, but she had been hoping that he would do something before then, that he would send off some kind of signal. And now he had. He had written her a letter. She ripped it open.

Lucerne

Dear Emily,

Whether or not you come to treasure this letter, you must take a moment to be grateful for the paper upon which it is inscribed. I am chaperoning a group of students around Switzerland and am a hard taskmaster who forces his charges to figure out their own train schedules, their own money, their own postage, all of which they manage with varying degrees of success. The travails that two young ladies went through to obtain this sheet of paper along with several for themselves I shall not recount because it is, after all, only one sheet of paper, and these travails would require several.

Switzerland is astonishingly beautiful, so clean that the only litter in the streets is the flower petals. The girls (at least the one who is willing to talk about such things) report that there has been toilet paper in every public rest room. We are admiring the Alps, eating spaghetti—a quick glance at a map ought to have prepared us for the amount of Italian food around—and looking for video games and movies in English. Fewer museums on this trip, because all of us—myself

included—are bewildered by Swiss history. But then one doesn't end up with three official languages by having a simple history.

I am startled by the military presence, the jets flying in formation and the uniformed soldiers, who are not as young as our soldiers. Remaining neutral appears to be hard work . . . although it couldn't possibly be as hard as being in Europe and not able to drink wine.

As ever,
Jeff

Emily read the letter quickly. It felt short—although it wasn't—and she was disappointed. But what had she wanted? Raptures about her lustrous blue eyes?

She read the letter again. It was actually a nice letter, impersonal, but interesting. Basically very nice. It was probably exactly the right thing to send to a former love. She read it a third time.

Yes, it was a good letter, a very good letter. What if someone had told her to write a letter to a man she had once lived with? She would rather have been told to throw herself in the river. At least she could have done that.

She glanced at the postmark. The letter had been forwarded from her apartment, and the little journey across Chicago had taken as long as the trip across the Atlantic. Jeff should be home by now. She picked up the phone and dialed. He answered.

"This is Emily. Why can't you drink wine?"

"What do you mean?" If he was surprised to hear from her, he wasn't showing it. "I drink wine. *You* might not call it wine, but the label says it's wine. Sometimes it says serve very, very cold and has pictures of grapes, but it calls itself wine."

"Your letter, I just got your letter, and you said you couldn't drink wine."

"Oh . . . on the trip. I don't drink in front of my students."

"Really? How dreadful." Actually Emily thought it sounded like a nice change from all those business lunches where you had to drink. "Is that in the job description?"

"Most teachers feel this way. And those who smoke try not to smoke in front of the kids either."

"That's right." Emily remembered the smoke-clogged teacher's lounge. "Mr. Crockett never smoked or drank in front of us, did he?"

"No, but Woody said that he smoked."

"He did? How did Woody know that?"

"How did Woody ever know things? But you said you just got my letter. I've been home for almost a week."

"It had to be forwarded," she explained. "I moved. I done bought myself a house."

"A house? That's big news. What's it like?"

"It's wonderful." She described it, going on and on about her doorknobs, the red geraniums in her window boxes, and her flagstone walk until any normal person would have hung up on her. "But enough about me," she said at last, forcing herself to shut up. "What are you doing this summer? Are you teaching?"

"No, I won't teach in the summer—burnout avoidance tactics. But I do spend a fair amount of time with the kids on the *Herald* staff. Some of the boys are coming up to Northwestern for a conference of high school newspaper editors, and I was hoping they could stay for a few extra days and bless some reporters at the *Trib* or the *Sun-Times* with their company, but it doesn't look like it's going to work out."

"Can I help?" Emily offered. "I know plenty of people on the sports desks, and I could—" She stopped. The name Jeff Grant would open enough doors at a newspaper.

"Actually, the problem is housing. Two of the kids' parents are divorced, and their mothers don't have a dime. We're scouting around for relatives who've got the floor space for sleeping bags."

"Do I count as a relative?" Emily heard herself say. "I've got a basement with nothing but floor space."

* * *

Emily was thrilled. She knew she was overreacting, she knew this was putting too much significance on a visit from six adolescent males and their teacher, but she felt as if her

life were finally getting started. She had her house and now she was having seven houseguests. Seven. Your run-of-the-mill single person never had seven houseguests. Only people whose lives were in order had seven houseguests. What a shame that not all her new living room furniture had come yet.

Furniture or not, she was going to do this right, do it as her mother would have done. Listening to Woody's show the Sunday before they were to come, she drew up a list of all that she was going to do that week. Monday evening she would make a lasagna and put it in the freezer. Tuesday she would bake cookies, maybe even a cake on Wednesday. She would get a ham, hot dogs, cold cuts, ice cream and soda—did teenage boys drink diet soda? Probably not.

The next day, she decided to leave work a little early so that she could do most of the grocery shopping and still have time to assemble the lasagna. A pair of ice dancers were in town. Emily and Stuart took them out to lunch, tucked them into a limousine, and started to walk back to the office. They were on Adams, about to cross Wells when they ran into Art Tremaine whom Emily had worked with at the bank. They stopped, said hello. Art introduced his two companions, people from a venture capital firm. Stuart started to chat.

Emily grew impatient, shifting from one foot to another. Not only did she want to get back to the office so she could leave early, but she hated trying to have a conversation underneath the girders of the el track. Whenever a train rattled overhead, bits of grit blew off the track and no one could hear anyone else. Emily had once signed a sentimental petition to preserve the tracks as a part of the city's heritage, but that didn't mean she had to stand in their grimy shadow while she did business.

At last they all promised to have lunch someday. Relieved, Emily nodded farewell, turned, and stepped off the curb. She didn't look, didn't notice the broken concrete, and suddenly she felt her ankle slip sideward. She crashed down hard, sprawling half in the street, half on the sidewalk.

"Emily . . . my God . . . what happened? . . . are you all right?" The others crowded around.

"I'm fine . . . I just fell . . . I'm fine."

But she wasn't. She pushed on her hands, managing to sit up. Pain flashed out from her ankle, searing up her leg. She didn't know how she was going to stand.

She was mortified. She did business with these people. She didn't want them to see her like this. She was on the ground, her skirt was dirty, her stockings were in shreds. Her purse had come open: her lipstick, her comb, her keys were scattered across the pavement. What was she going to do?

Stuart knelt down, holding out his hands. Reluctantly Emily took them and tried to stand. Art Tremaine put his arm around her waist, lifting her up. She had to lean against him.

She had never liked Art Tremaine.

"I don't think they ever resurface the pavement under the tracks," he said. "I'm surprised more people don't fall."

Emily didn't want to talk about the Chicago streets. She wanted to get away from these four men, all looking down at her with such concern. "If we could get a cab," she said, "Stuart and I could go back to the office." At this point, Stuart was the least of all the evils.

Stuart was shaking his head. "I think you should have someone take a look at you. You might have broken something."

Broken?

"A friend of mine is an orthopedic surgeon," Art volunteered. "He's got an office not too far from here."

Emily protested. She would rather see her own doctor, she didn't want to take up their time, she would prop her foot up for the rest of the afternoon, see how it felt—

No. They were taking her to the doctor. "He's a very good friend," Art added. "I'm sure he won't make us wait."

Stuart hailed a cab while the venture capitalists gathered up the contents of her purse. Art said good-bye to them and keeping his arm around Emily's waist, helped her into the cab. She scooted across the seat, and as the driver pulled away from the curb, she tried to brush the dirt off the lap of her linen skirt. Grit clung to the fabric's pebbly weave. She looked down at her feet. Her shoes were ruined; the pale leather was scuffed and marred.

Art told the driver to stop at a building across from

Northwestern Hospital. Emily groped for her purse, wanting to pay the fare, but Stuart had her purse up in front with him. Art paid.

"This is so nice of you," she said. That wasn't what she wanted to say. She wanted to make a scene about the cab fare, she wanted to insist that Art let her pay him back. "This will ruin your schedule for the rest of the day—I really appreciate it."

But she didn't.

Would you rather that they abandoned you in the street, left you to crawl back up to the curb so you could prop yourself up against a girder of the el track, the only bag lady in a powder blue linen suit? Is that what you want?

Probably.

Art slid out of the cab, then turned back, extending his hand through the open door. "This would be a lot easier if I carried you, Emily. You're small, you can't weigh much."

"*No.* I mean, no,"—she tried to sound more calm—"really, I'd rather walk." Being propped up against an el girder was bad, but having a business associate sweep her off her feet like Vivien Leigh was out of the question.

Art smiled. "Don't you mean hop?"

They are being nice. They are being very nice. Why can't you relax, accept their help, be grateful that they are so nice?

Because she couldn't.

The waiting room was crowded, but Art spoke to the receptionist. She picked up the phone, and Emily's name was called within minutes. The other patients stirred angrily. Emily wanted to apologize to them, tell them that she did not want special treatment, that it was the men she was with, not she, demanding this.

A nurse helped her back to the X-ray room. A technician positioned her foot carefully, pulling the black cone of the X-ray machine down near her ankle. Then he helped her into an examining room. After a while the doctor appeared. Nothing was broken, he said, and it didn't seem to be a bad sprain. "It's not a career-ending injury."

She didn't smile. "When can I walk again?"

"If you're careful, you'll be back to normal in six weeks."

"Six *weeks?*" What was she going to do?

"You won't be an invalid the whole time," the doctor

assured her. "That's how long you'll be aware of it." He picked up an elastic bandage, adding, "If you can stay off it, you'll be able to limp around in a week."

Stay off it for a week? How could she do that? She was having seven houseguests; she didn't even know how she was going to get home.

The doctor finished taping her ankle and gave her a prescription for painkillers. Her panty hose were too ragged to put back on, and her left shoe would not fit over the bandage.

Out in the waiting room, Stuart and Art had been planning her future. If she didn't mind waiting here, they suggested when she reappeared, Stuart could go get his car and drive her home.

"Oh, no," she said. She almost felt indecent, wearing a business suit without stockings. It was like one of those nightmarish dreams in which you've forgotten to get dressed. "That's really nice of you, but I have some friends I can call."

"But we don't—"

"No, no. They would want me to call, they wouldn't understand if I didn't. I really appreciate all you've done, but these are my neighbors. I live in the suburbs now. People are like that out there."

Stuart and Art, having no information on life in the suburbs, had to assume that she was telling the truth . . . even though she wasn't. Of course, she could have called the Grogans, the retired couple next door. Although surprised, they would have come. But Emily was not about to ask for more favors. The nurse helped her back to a phone. Grateful for her ability to remember numbers, she dialed.

A too-pleasant voice answered. "Good afternoon, this is Helping Hands, Incorporated. How can we help you today?"

"Good afternoon, this is Emily Gordon, and I need to rent a mother."

* * *

Emily's rented mother appeared at the doctor's office within forty-five minutes and took charge. The mother of four teenage sons, Mrs. Neels was used to injuries of every sort. She drove Emily home, installed her on her sofa, and

went out to get the prescriptions filled, stopping at the grocery store to buy yogurt, fruits, frozen dinners, things that could be fixed by a one-legged chef. She put a chair at the top of the stairs, then showed Emily how to sit on the bottom step and then bump herself upward, using the chair at the top to hoist herself upright.

"Now is there anything else?" Mrs. Neels asked.

The painkiller had started to work. "No, I'll be fine," Emily said, "just fine."

And the first day home she was. Determinedly efficient, she redid her home Rolodex until a courier from the office arrived. She took care of everything that had been in her In-Box; she set up lunches with people she had been meaning to lunch with for six months; she read things she had been meaning to read for six months; she got an extraordinary amount done.

But on Wednesday her energy evaporated. For every sedentary project she could think of, she lacked something —new file folders, the right size of carton. She didn't even have new buttons to sew on her summer blazer. By the afternoon, she thought she would go mad. She was tired of being home. The kitchen trash needed to be taken out, the dishwasher needed to be emptied, she needed to do laundry. She wanted to wash her hair.

People called—Liz, Ann Marie, Stuart, Crispin, wanting to know if there was anything they could do to help, but of course there wasn't. What was she supposed to say to her boss? Please, Crispin, come out to the suburbs and wash my hair?

The phone rang again.

"Emily, this is Jeff."

"Oh, Jeff . . . hello. How are you?"

He was fine. She lied and said she was fine too.

"I'm calling," he said, "to find out what's a good time for us to get in tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"That's the eighteenth, isn't it?"

"Is it? I mean, yes, of course. I was expecting you." Was it June 18 already?

"Emily, are you all right?"

"I'm fine. What time should I expect you?"

"That's up to you. We're flexible. When will you be home from work?"

"It doesn't matter. I can be flexible too. Just name a time and I'll be here."

"What about four, four-thirty? Is that too early?"

"That's great. Four's great."

"Then four it is. And, Emily, I meant it when I said you're not to go to any trouble."

"Oh, I won't. It's no trouble. Everything's under control." All her trash cans were full, the dishwasher needed to be unloaded, her hair was dirty. The lasagna, the ham, the cookies were still only items on a list. Nothing was under control at all. "Everything's fine."

* * *

That night she dreamed of him. Emily did not usually remember her dreams. She had always assumed that there were two kinds of people: the imaginative, creative ones who remembered dreams, and then the rest of the world. She considered herself part of the rest of the world. But this dream she remembered.

They were in Nancy Hanks, and she was following him around, going to his classes with him, but he didn't teach at Nancy Hanks High, the school they had gone to. Instead it was a new school, Metropolitan High it was called in her dream, even though that was a ridiculous name for a school in a town the size of Nancy Hanks. In this new school Jeff's desk sat on a carpeted dais in the center of the classroom; he was surrounded by students. He told her she could sit on the dais with him while he taught, but she had to take off her shoes. Perhaps it was something about the carpet—she wasn't sure—but she did have to take off her shoes.

She didn't want to. It felt humiliating, taking off her shoes, her little black Capezios. Jeff didn't have to take his shoes off. She wanted to leave hers on too. But he said she had to take them off. She reached down to pull them off, then woke.

* * *

Thursday morning she again called her friends at Helping Hands who promised to send over two rent-a-moms.

You're crazy, you know that. Here you are, paying some ungodly amount of money per hour—no, with two ladies, it will be twice some ungodly amount of money per hour—so your house can be clean for seventeen-year-old boys.

No, you're paying that money for your peace of mind, so that you can feel calm, organized, in control.

So that you can go on being your overly obsessive, high-strung jerk of a self.

The rent-a-moms were gone by two. Emily had clean hair, clean clothes, and toilet paper in her bathrooms. There wasn't much in the house to eat, but she had her carryout menus. They could get pizza or Chinese tonight and, like Scarlett O'Hara, worry about tomorrow when it came.

At four-thirty she heard a car stop. She hopped over to the front window, easing the curtain aside. A little red VW Rabbit was at the curb; a silver station wagon pulled up behind it. The car doors popped open, and boys piled out, an extraordinary number of boys. Jeff appeared from around the far side of the Rabbit, his walk having that unfamiliar broad-shouldered athletic spring to it. The boys started to unload, and Jeff came up the walk alone.

Emily inched to the door and opened it before he could ring the bell.

"This is some kind of neighborhood," he said as a greeting.

"I know. Everyone else has libraries, maid's quarters, and back staircases. I'm the runt of the litter. But do come in."

He stepped forward; she tried to step backward.

He noticed immediately. "What's this? Are you all right?"

"Oh, it's nothing. I sprained my ankle, that's all."

"A sprained ankle? Why didn't you tell me? We could have made some other arrangements." He looked concerned.

She hated that. "It's not a problem. I can manage fine," she said even though he was bound to discover how untrue that was.

"A sprained ankle . . . that seems out of character for you," he said.

She thought so. "I don't know that character had much to do with it. It was the Chicago streets. Now where are these boys?"

"Unloading the cars. We brought a remarkable amount of stuff. Where shall we put it all?"

She pointed to the garage, trying to laugh about the location of the steps to her family room. "And you're in the guest room. It's through there. The sheets are clean, and there are towels in the bathroom."

"You didn't have to do that."

"It was no problem," she lied.

The boys came up on the porch, and Jeff introduced them—Colin, Evan, Spencer, Clark, Mike, Peter. Emily wished she could ask them to wear name tags; she didn't know how she would keep them all straight. Then the boys carried their sleeping bags directly into the garage while Jeff came into the house. Emily sat down; her ankle hurt.

"What a pretty place this is," he said. "It suits you."

Usually Emily loved it when people admired her house. She gave everyone a complete tour. But how could she give Jeff a tour? She could barely answer the door. "Wait until you see the kitchen," she told him. "That really suits me."

Two of the boys tapped on the front door, then came in, carrying a large Coleman cooler between them. "We'd like to put this in your kitchen, Miss Gordon, if that's all right."

She had just sat down, but she hoisted herself up again and lurched into the kitchen. They had indeed brought a lot of stuff—paper plates and plastic utensils, huge amounts of hamburger, canned tomatoes, spaghetti, buns, mustard, and mayonnaise.

In a moment she felt Jeff at her shoulder. She turned to him. "Why did you bring all this?" He was as bad as her mother. "I could have fed you."

"Didn't I tell you not to worry about food?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"We brought sandwiches for supper, Miss Gordon," one of the boys interrupted. "Is that okay?"

"I guess so," she answered. Tomorrow, she thought, she'd do better tomorrow.

They put the meat and cheese on plates, setting the mayonnaise and the mustard jars directly on Grandma Postle's table. Emily took her place at one end of the table, Jeff sat across from her, with three boys on either side.

She wished she felt better. This should have been fun.

The boys were bright and articulate, poised and seemingly self-assured. But their self-confidence could not have been too deep; they were all desperate show-offs, full of witty banter and mocking derision. Emily supposed that that was exactly what she, Jeff, Woody, Dan, Kitty, Jack, and Julie had been like. And Woody might still be.

After dinner, Jeff made it clear that the boys were to do the dishes. Emily got up, protesting that they didn't need to, really they didn't. She didn't want them blundering around her kitchen, putting everything in the wrong place.

"Emily, please." Jeff took her arm, drawing her aside. "They need to learn that women aren't always going to wait on them."

"But—" She stopped. There was no answer to that. And for a moment she felt like she was in high school again, resenting him for always knowing what to say. He could write a good letter, he could walk without clinging to the back of a chair. It wasn't fair; it really wasn't fair.

* * *

Jeff was not one to hover. After the boys had finished doing the dishes, he herded them downstairs and spent five minutes as camp counselor, making sure that there were six sleeping bags, reminding them that the bathroom had to be intact when they left, then five more minutes as teacher, getting them started looking over some of the material for the conference tomorrow. "Holler if you need me," he said and then went back up to the main part of the house.

As he came up into the garage, he heard a soft thumping. He eased the kitchen door open. Emily was balanced on one foot, sponge in hand, reaching across the countertop to wipe the Formica behind the toaster, which in all fairness was not a spot any of the boys would have thought to wipe. Then she hopped a few steps back, her light skirt swaying against her legs. She leaned down to open the already running dishwasher. She pulled out the top rack, checking it carefully. She adjusted one glass a little, then pulled out the bottom.

She hadn't changed. Six years and she hadn't changed.

He had. There wasn't any great virtue in it; he hadn't had any choice. You couldn't be like that—all impatient and wanting to do everything yourself—when you were teach-

ing. You had to stand back and wait, let the kids figure things out for themselves.

He looked across this old-fashioned, yellow kitchen at Emily inspecting her dishwasher. He spoke quietly. "I'm sorry that you feel you need to do that."

Emily started. Apparently she had not heard him come in. She looked over her shoulder. "No one wants their dishes chipped in the dishwasher." She sounded defensive.

"That's right. No one does so you can generally count on other people to do it properly."

She flushed, closed the dishwasher, and restarted it.

This was going to be a long five days, a very long five days.

What had he been expecting? That things would be easy? That all the difficulties they had ever had would suddenly disappear? Was that what he had come here to find out?

Emily started for the living room. Jeff's impulse was to reach out, help her, give her his arm, but he knew she'd hate that. He followed her, watching as she held on to the kitchen counter, then to the living room wall. As she put weight on her arm, her knit shirt tightened; her breasts stirred softly with the jerk and hop of her gait.

For such a delicately built person, she was—and had always been—nicely proportioned.

She lowered herself into one of the wing chairs upholstered in garnet velvet. She smoothed her skirt, straightened her shirt. He found it hard to connect this person, her bright blue eyes tense and masked, with the pale, graceful body he had known six years ago.

Perhaps if he could get the conversation more personal, she would drop this tight, defensive armor. "This is hard on you, isn't it?" he asked.

"Nobody likes to be sick."

He shook his head. "That's not true. My ex-wife loved being sick. No one expects anything of sick people."

Whatever reaction he had been hoping for didn't come. She changed the subject. "Your students seem like a nice bunch of kids," she said.

"They're great."

"So you like teaching?"

She had asked him that last April, but he was willing to answer again. "I do. I don't plan on doing it forever, but it's

been good for a few years. I suppose everybody wants something safe to do for a while after a divorce."

She didn't look like she believed him, and he could understand why. It was a pretty lame answer. She must know plenty of men whose first years after a divorce had been anything but safe. But he did get tired of having to explain why he was teaching. It was perhaps not the most prestigious job on the face of the earth—certainly it was one of the least lucrative—but it was nothing to apologize for.

"Will you go back to reporting?" she asked. "Will you do another book?"

He was used to these questions too. "No, writing's too solitary a life for me. I like being around people. I'm thinking about eventually going into politics."

Emily brightened. That had been the right answer.

"But I won't do it," he went on, "until I have a more solid financial base. Another teacher and I have been talking about setting up shop as consultants."

"What kind of consultants?" she asked.

"We can both teach people to write clear prose. Give us six weeks with anyone, and he will be writing better at the end of it. The school system may not value this as it should, but law firms, think tanks, places like that, will."

"Oh, you're absolutely right." She was now very interested. "I used to go out with a guy who was an attorney and he said that a lot of new people pretty much spent their first year learning how to write, which is an incredible waste of resources. Would you be willing to move to the city?"

"Definitely."

"Then I think you'll be surprised at how many places could use something like that. What you'd need to do is figure out who really makes the decision to buy those services. It's not always the person who you think it would be—it's not always the person who thinks it himself."

"Oh?" Jeff wasn't ready to talk about this. Whenever they were sick of the system, the paperwork, the silly notions administrators had about what should be happening in the classroom, he and Carolyn Markowitz would swear that this was what they should do. But so far their plans had not gone beyond that.

"You'll need a lot of good contacts." Emily seemed ready

to make the plans for him. "The trick will be how to price yourself. I'd almost be tempted to *over*price."

"Indeed?" She was clearly in the middle of redecorating: two scrolling garnet wing chairs sat on either side of a severely horizontal Scandinavian sofa. He didn't know anyone who *re*decorated. Decorating in the first place was a big enough challenge on a teacher's paycheck. She must make a great deal of money.

"Yes," she was still talking, "it would define your market and you could customize your instruction . . . or seem to customize it, which is all that would really count because—"

Jeff tried hard to listen. She was his hostess; he was obligated to be polite. Even more, she must know what she was talking about. He could learn something from her, things that he and Carolyn would need to know.

So what if such talk was what he liked the least about her? He hadn't liked it when she had stood up in the smoke-clogged teachers' lounge last spring and started organizing their banquet table. He hadn't liked it that summer six years ago when she couldn't relax, couldn't let go of her responsibilities, her authority.

He ought to be able to make allowances this time. She felt lousy, she was semihelpless, a situation hardly designed to show her at her best. And behind this need for control, this need to be in charge, were her most admirable qualities, her independence, her determination, her undeniable competence.

Jeff knew his Midwestern history, and he could imagine no city more right for Emily Gordon than Chicago. It was a town that had repeatedly gone to great lengths in the most extraordinary undertakings.

It was built on a site entirely unsuited for a city, a muddy bog at lake level that got flooded every year. So in the 1850s, long before the days of bulldozers and construction cranes, Chicago decided to raise itself. The citizens jackscrewed the buildings onto pilings and dredged the Chicago River for fill to elevate the streets by as much as twelve feet. Three decades later, just before the Great Fire, the city reversed the flow of the river so that it carried sewage away from the lake. Then in two days, three and a half square miles of the

city burnt, leaving a third of the population homeless, and the city's architects responded by showing the world how to build skyscrapers.

Although the line of her collarbone was fragile, Emily shared with this city of big shoulders its vitality and extraordinary determination. If she was occasionally defensive, needing to justify herself, to excuse herself for not being something she was not, so her city was occasionally prickly, bristling for not having Boston's traditions, New York's culture, San Francisco's grace.

Just as there was only one Chicago, Jeff knew even as he sat here resenting this flood of advice, that for him at least, there was only one Emily. He had been married, and if he ever made a living wage again, he might marry a second time. But Emily would always be there, a question, a fantasy.

He could think of no good reason to be here except that he had six students with six sleeping bags and she had an empty floor. But here he was.

Hope might not spring eternal, but it sure did come around every few years.

nine

The next morning Emily's ankle hurt, it hurt a lot. She had done too much on Thursday. She fumbled for some aspirin, choking them down without water because she had forgotten to fill a glass before going to bed and she didn't feel like struggling into the bathroom. She rearranged the pillows under her foot and lay back down, waiting for the aspirin to work. Then she heard noises in the kitchen. Jeff and the boys were up. Ten minutes, she told herself, ten minutes and she'd get up. But she must have fallen back asleep; the next thing she knew it was an hour later and the house was quiet. Jeff and the boys had left.

For a moment she felt abandoned, but mostly she felt like a failure. Her mother would have never, not ever, let guests make their own breakfast. Emily inched her way downstairs, and as she ate a Hostess doughnut from one of the boxes she had found neatly lined up on the counter, she limped around the kitchen, flipping through her cookbooks, checking recipes to see if she had the ingredients for any of them. She finally decided to make brownies although she would have to substitute cocoa powder and extra butter for the baking chocolate. It took her most of the morning. Then she let them cook too long, and they were dry.

Her guests stayed at the conference all day, returning

home to fix sloppy joes for dinner. Jeff raised his eyebrows when she brought out the brownies.

"You didn't have to do that," he said.

She felt as though he were criticizing her. "They're not very good," she said as if that justified her having done it.

The boys didn't seem to care how dry the brownies were, and what they didn't eat while cleaning the kitchen they took downstairs to finish.

"You can stay up here, you know," Emily said.

"It's okay," Michael—she had managed to learn their names—answered. "All our stuff is spread out down there."

Jeff went down with the boys. Emily sat in the study, watching TV programs she didn't like, waiting up for him. But when he came upstairs, he only stepped in to say good night to her.

Well, can you blame him? You haven't exactly been Miss Congeniality.

Saturday morning, she got out of bed, determined to be a better hostess. But it took her a long time to shower and dress. Just as she was finishing, she heard the doors slam and the cars start.

She sank down on the bed. She had hoped for so much, that she would do a good job, that Jeff's students would like her, that Jeff would like her. This stupid, stupid ankle. Now everything was ruined.

The day passed slowly. At least someone had brought in the paper so she had that to read. They all came home in time to make dinner—chili this time. Emily ate hers silently, listening to them talk. Apparently the conference itself would be over at noon on Sunday. Then they would spend a few days with reporters Jeff knew at the *Sun-Times* and the *Tribune.*

"If you have the afternoon off," Emily said as they got up to clear. "Maybe I could take you all out to a late brunch." How stupid that sounded. "Or I could get tickets to one of the games." She didn't know if the Cubs or the White Sox were even in town this weekend, but surely the agency could find tickets to something.

"Actually," the boy named Colin said, "we thought you might have some yard work or something we could do for you."

Jeff had been carrying something into the kitchen. He stopped dead, then looked back at Colin. "I am impressed."

Colin flushed. "Don't be. It was my dad's idea. He said maybe we all could paint or do some yard work as a way of thanking Miss Gordon. I forgot about it until now."

"Well, Emily?" Jeff asked. "Do you need some slave labor?"

"I suppose." She still preferred the idea that *she*, who could hardly walk, would take everyone out to eat or arrange for great seats at Wrigley Field. "I mean, I haven't really thought much about the yard. I've got a lawn service that mows"—her friends at rent-a-mom had found that for her—"but my father did say the heavy spring work wasn't done this year."

Jeff turned back to his students. "Then why don't you guys go out and take a look?"

Half an hour later they were back with a list: All the bushes needed pruning, everything needed to be mulched, a couple of the railroad ties holding up the raised flower bed needed to be straightened. Long summers of doing their parents' yard work had taught these boys a lot about horticulture.

Emily listened, overwhelmed. "Could we decide tomorrow?"

"But if we need mulch," Colin said, "we'll need to pick it up on our way home."

"Oh, well, I guess mulch is okay." No one could do much damage with mulch. "And we'll talk about the rest of this in the morning."

"Do you have a rake, pruning shears, things like that?" Jeff asked.

No, she didn't. They'd have to buy all that too. "I do have a ladder. If you need a ladder, I've got one of Gordon Construction's finest."

Emily took the gardening list upstairs with her, but soon found that she couldn't read the boys' handwriting. So the next afternoon they all dove in without her having approved a master plan, which made her nervous. She enthroned herself on a lawn chair in the middle of the backyard, and it wasn't an hour before she was ready to kill herself with the pruning shears.

"Do you want me to mulch out to here or just to here?"

"Shall I prune this branch?"

"If we could go out and get some peat moss . . ."

"My dad uses the grass clippings . . ."

Emily tried to concentrate, tried to make these decisions. But she had given this no thought, she didn't have enough information. She hated making decisions when she wasn't adequately prepared. She felt frazzled, distracted, out of control.

Would you rather not have this done? Your house would turn into something out of a Gothic novel, with waist-high weeds and bushes that blocked out the sun. People would start calling you the Sinister Spinster of Wilmette. Is that what you want?

Probably.

She kept trying, knowing that her father would never let work be done on his yard in such a willy-nilly way.

"Were these irises, Miss Gordon? We probably shouldn't cut the foliage."

"Have you thought about trenching around the pachysandra? It would make mowing easier."

"Miss Gordon, I think you've got some poison ivy back in here."

By two she no longer cared what happened to her yard. Whatever got cut would grow back. "I'm going inside," she announced. "Use your own judgment or ask Colin what his father would do." Emily had been hearing a lot about Colin's father's garden.

Jeff came over to her chair and for the first time, she let him help her up.

"You think I'm crazy, don't you?" She could hear how defensive she sounded.

"No, Emily, I don't."

She didn't believe him.

He opened the side door for her. It was cooler inside the thick walls of the house even though she hadn't turned on the air-conditioning yet. She lurched through the kitchen, determined not to look at Jeff. She didn't know what would be in his brown eyes, pity or contempt, and she didn't want to find out.

At the foot of the attic stairs, she heard him speak. "I

suppose you're going to pitch a fit about being carried upstairs."

She stopped. "How did you know I pitched a fit about being carried?"

"You did?" Now she looked at him; he was smiling. "When did someone try to carry you? What a courageous man." He turned toward her, facing away from the stairs, holding out his hands for hers. "And here I don't even have the courage to ask how you manage this on your own."

They maneuvered the stairs, Jeff stepping up backward, Emily putting her weight on his hands. Once they were upstairs, she sat down on the bed. Her room got the afternoon sun, and through the dormer window the light slanted across the rose-carpeted floor, leaving a large rectangle of shell pink.

Jeff was at her feet, taking off her shoes. "Are you comfortable?" he asked. "Do you need to change?"

She was wearing a loose, light sundress as comfortable as a nightgown. "No, I'm fine."

He rose. "Why was I so sure that would be the answer?" He was smiling down at her. "It seems to me that if you aren't going to let me carry you, at least you could take off your dress. Any truly grateful woman would. Now lie down and show me how you want all these pillows arranged."

Emily swung her legs up onto the bed, and Jeff plumped and tucked her pillows. It should have been pleasant to lie here and be fussed over, be made comfortable. This was what she needed in her life, someone to be nice to her.

But what happened when someone showed up and tried? She was a bitch.

"Now what else can I do for you?" he asked.

"Nothing . . . nothing, you've done enough." She meant that to sound grateful, but she wasn't sure it had come out right.

Jeff turned, crossing through the bright square of sunlight, then disappeared down the shadowy staircase.

Never had Emily been so conscious of the defects in her personality. Yes, she was a "high-control" personality type. But for God's sake, she had only sprained her ankle. Was that enough to justify turning into a lunatic? It was terrifying, how powerful these needs of hers were. What if some-

thing was really wrong? What if she had some debilitating illness? What if she had been Bobby Hutchinson?

* * *

Woody was at the station in plenty of time. It was a good feeling, this having enough time. He'd been feeling so tired lately, always in a rush, always behind schedule.

But this week he was on time, and the show was all organized. He was going to talk about the theater, about putting on the spring musical, the way everyone stayed at the school late, fanning out through the whole building, the cast rehearsing onstage, the lighting crew smoking in the parking lot, the set and scenery people borrowing tools from Wood Shop, the costume committee sewing in the home ec room. It was a good, well-thought-out show.

And boring. Suddenly it sounded boring. He'd spent so much time this week thinking about the theater he didn't want to spend another three hours talking about it. He wanted to do something different; he wanted to talk about something that really mattered. He sank down on one of the canvas director's chairs in the corner of the news studio. The stitching groaned under his weight.

Why did this have to happen? Here he was all prepared, better organized than he'd been since he started doing the people and now this had to happen. He shut his eyes, squeezing them tight, and then it came, an idea so clear, so complete, that he wouldn't even need notes.

He pushed himself out of the chair, full of purpose. The music wouldn't fit, but if he hurried, he'd have time to pull more. He needed Motown, a lot of Motown—the Temptations, the Four Tops, the Supremes, Martha and the Vandelas . . . "Dancing in the Streets"—because dancing had been how it had all started.

* * *

Emily made her way downstairs at five, keeping her balance by pressing her hand against the wall. Her kitchen was crowded with boys, joking, laughing, chattering. As soon as they noticed her, they hauled her out to the side yard to see their handiwork.

The yard had survived her absence; in fact, it looked

better than ever with neat trenches around the mulched beds. She would not have pruned the bushes so dramatically, but they had a fresh, clean look. "This is great, guys. Really it is."

Jeff met her at the back door. "I don't think there's been any permanent damage," he said softly.

"Oh, no. I love it. I hadn't realized how much needed to be done." She took his hand for help up the steps. "And I'd like to apologize for the way I've been acting."

"Don't be silly," he waved his hand, brushing her words aside. "We've managed fine. We didn't want you to go to any trouble."

He thought she was apologizing for not having a lasagna in the freezer. "No, I didn't mean that. I was talking about what a bitch I've been."

"Oh." He smiled, but didn't disagree. "Think what your mother would be like if she couldn't get right in the middle of everything. It would drive her crazy."

"But she has an excuse. Growing up during the Depression and the war, losing my real father like that." Emily had never articulated this about her mother before. "No wonder she needs to control whatever she can. But I don't have her excuse."

"If something happened to her, in some sense it has happened to you too."

"But my sister's not like this," Emily reflected. "She can sit back and let things happen."

"I don't know. Sometimes I think Kelly is a compulsive exerciser, that's how she copes. Being at the bottom of the Gordon family totem pole can't be easy."

No, it couldn't be. Emily had the sense to see that. Sometimes she thought her sister was too good to be true, someone so even-tempered and sunny that her feelings never need be considered. Kelly undoubtedly had her troubles, but a compulsive exerciser?

Well, maybe.

Emily slid into the kitchen booth, watching as Jeff and the boys finished dinner. She thought about all the well-paid jerks she wasn't dating this summer. None of them knew enough about her family to help her understand her mother and sister; none of them cared enough to find out.

But Jeff did.

The menu at dinner that night again had a Boy Scout camp feel to it—spaghetti and ground beef surrounded by something wet, but as they all ate the boys were for the first time comfortable enough with her to ask her questions about herself.

It turned out that they were curious about her job. "So when you went to college, you weren't planning on doing this?" one asked.

"Goodness, no. I went off to college planning on majoring in English." Mr. Crockett must have been a superb teacher indeed for her to have thought herself an English major. "But I switched to economics and then got an M.B.A. My first job was in a bank, but I didn't like that and so when this came up, I took it. I thought I'd be doing only investments. If I'd had any idea how much client contact there was, I probably wouldn't have taken the job, but actually that's been a lot of fun."

"What didn't you like about banking?" the one named Spencer asked. He looked a little worried as if he had been considering such a career.

"I found it too rigid, too competitive. But remember," she added in what she hoped was a comforting way, "I was a woman. I think the men found it a more comfortable environment."

She started to eat again, twisting her fork around some strands of spaghetti. Then she heard Jeff speak. "I didn't realize you didn't like the bank."

Emily almost dropped her fork. He didn't realize she had hated the bank? How could he not have known?

You were here, that whole summer when it was the worst, when they were starting to have me manage those people, when I couldn't stand to go in because I knew that I was failing . . . you were here. How could you not know?

Because she hadn't told him. Because as bad as everything at work had been, having him know that she was failing would have been worse.

Emily always felt like she had to impress men. She wasn't ever cutesy or girly-girly, she didn't try to flatter them into believing that they were big and strong, but she was careful not to let them see her cracks and flaws. Perhaps it had

started on that day, so many years ago, when her mother had dressed her in a little pink bonnet and had taken her to meet Jim Gordon for the first time. So much had depended on what he thought of her.

Even now when she dated, she was careful about what the men saw of her, careful to appear the well-adjusted, hardworking but fun-loving, warmhearted but not-too-desperate-for-marriage working girl. Since at least half the other single women in Chicago were trying to project exactly the same image, they must all seem like nothing more than a parade of plastic cookie cutters, one after another, a line of shiny forms.

No wonder none of these relationships had ever worked. How can you have a real relationship with someone when you refuse to let him see what your needs are?

Emily was still pondering the question when after dinner, the boys suggested that she be an eighth for a game of bridge. "Mr. Grant said you know how."

She was pleased that they weren't going to disappear downstairs again. "I haven't played in years."

That didn't seem to bother them any more than too-dry brownies had. They cut for partners; Emily drew Evan and in a moment found herself installed in the kitchen booth with Jeff sliding in next to her. As he was fanning out the cards so they could cut for the deal, his elbow bumped hers. He drew in with a left-hander's automatic apology, but Emily stuck her elbow out, jabbing him. He poked her back, and they were starting on a fine game of dueling elbows when the phone rang.

"Do you want me to get that?" asked Spencer, who was to be Jeff's partner.

"Please."

He went over to the wall phone. "Miss Gordon's residence," he said so properly that he could already be working at a bank. "I'll see if she's in. May I ask who's calling?" He stepped out of the kitchen, his hand over the receiver. "It's Brian Orleckey."

"Who?" Then Emily remembered. Brian Orleckey was an attorney who worked at the same firm as Stuart's wife. Emily had met him at several of Stuart and Julia's parties and then had run into him on the street a few days before

she had sprained her ankle. "I think the cord's long enough to reach," she told Spencer, then waved at Jeff who was sliding out of the booth. "Don't move. I've nothing to hide." Spencer passed her the receiver. The cord snapped lightly against Jeff's chest. "Hello, Brian."

He returned her greeting. "Am I calling at a bad time?"

Evan started to deal.

"No, not at all," she said.

Of course, this was a bad time. It wasn't very nice to gab on the phone just as everyone was starting to play cards, but when a single woman got a call from a single man, the world had to come to a stop.

Brian had heard about her sprain and asked how she was. She was fine, would be back at work in a few days. "Hobbling, but working." Emily picked up her cards, starting to sort them. Maybe her hand would be bad enough that she could sit here and pass while she talked on the phone.

"Then I was wondering if you could hobble out to dinner with me."

"That would be lov—" Emily stopped, remembering. She took a breath. "Actually, Brian, no. I'm not dating this summer. I'm not going to until after Labor Day."

"Oh, fine, I under— . . . No, I don't. Labor Day, why Labor Day? Are you going to break up with someone after Labor Day?"

"No, there isn't anyone else." Emily was suddenly very conscious of three pairs of eyes on her. This was hard enough. Why did she have to be doing it in front of one ex-lover and two seventeen-year-old boys? At least when Britta had called Jeff six years ago, he had been able to turn his back and move out of Emily's kitchen. "At the beginning of the summer I decided not to date until after Labor Day."

"May I ask why not?"

Emily kept her eyes on the metal rim circling the tabletop, not wanting to look at her audience. "I'm tired of it. Brian, this is nothing personal, and I am telling you the truth. It's not you. I'm not going out with anyone this summer. At any other time, I'd be happy to see you, but this summer I'm not dating."

"Isn't that a little rigid?"

"It's incredibly rigid, but it's what I'm doing."

He did not understand. But single, heterosexual men did not have to understand. Emily handed the phone back to Spencer.

He and Evan were looking at her interestedly, waiting for her to explain, to say something.

"Get married young, guys," she advised. "Then you don't have to go through this crap."

"Evan, it's your bid," Jeff said.

They started to play. Emily had terrible cards, but she didn't care. What single woman wasn't used to being dealt one rotten hand after another? They played on. This was much nicer than dating. She wasn't having to work, she wasn't having to be charming and interesting and a good listener. Her cards continued to be so miserable she didn't even have to think about her bidding; she liked that. She could sit here, feeling Jeff's arm brush against her as he dealt the cards. The cuff of his polo shirt cut across his biceps, and his fingers were slender and quick just as she remembered Mr. Crockett's being.

At the end of a rubber, Jeff spoke to her softly. "Shall we listen to Woody's show?"

"Is it seven already?"

He lifted his arm, showing her his watch.

"There's a radio on the kitchen counter," she said.

Jeff slid out of the booth, and Emily suddenly found herself wanting to call him back, wanting to tell him to leave the radio off. She was having such a pleasant time. She didn't want that to change, and Woody had always specialized in changing things. Whatever the mood was in a room he entered, he changed it. That had been great when they were kids. When people were down, Woody perked them up. When they were bored, he entertained them, he made them laugh. And Illinois small-town summers were long enough that they all forgave him when he punctured pretty moments with a wry or rude remark.

But Emily was an adult now. Pretty moments were getting fewer and fewer in her life, and she didn't want this one tampered with. She did not want to spend the rest of the evening hearing about her teenage self.

But not listening to the show did not seem to be an option.

Worrying about what Woody was saying about her teenage self would probably be worse than actually hearing it.

Jeff returned to the café booth just as Woody opened the show. He started with a sweep of Broadway hits that had become Top 40 hits: a song from *Hair*, one from *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the Beatles' "Till There Was You," then Barbra Streisand singing "People." That seemed out of place. Emily looked at Jeff inquiringly.

"The theater department," he answered.

Oh, of course. The show would be about the spring musical.

But it wasn't.

And the black kids, well, they don't really get a fair shake around here. It's not that they can't join the modern dance club, it's not that there's any kind of rule about it, but there's never been a black girl in it even though anyone who's ever spent five minutes at a school dance knows that the black girls all dance about a million times better than the white girls. So at the beginning of the year, a couple of the black girls decided to try out.

Now to them, modern dance means dances that they are doing right now, the monkey and the swim, so that's what they do at their auditions. But to the white girls, the ones who run the modern dance club, who judge the auditions, modern dance means the stuff they've been learning down at the Academy of Dance that Miss Michelle runs over the Singer sewing machine store, and that's not exactly a place the town's little black children frequent.

So none of the black girls get in the modern dance club, and when two of them go to the principal and complain, which is even more startling a thing than them trying out in the first place, the white girls' explanation is simple.

"We weren't discriminating; we'd be happy to have any of them in the club, but they aren't trained dancers."

And that was the end of that.

"What is this?" Spencer asked. "Dancing in the Streets" was playing.

Jeff explained the concept of the show, mentioning that

Written-in-Stone High was something like Nancy Hanks High, without saying that it was exactly like Nancy Hanks High, that it was Nancy Hanks High.

"Not too much like us," Evan countered. "The blacks speak up for themselves all the time."

"You have to understand how different things were then," Jeff explained. "We took a lot for granted that we shouldn't have."

"Like what?" Spencer asked.

"There were tons of unwritten rules," Jeff answered, and before "My Girl" was done, he had them planning a feature for the newspaper on what race relations had been like at the school during the year the senior class had been born.

But as things turned out, dance club wasn't the end of it, not by a long shot. Once two black girls ask one question, there are too many other questions—why there are no black cheerleaders when half the football team is black, why the part of the black slave in *The Crucible* is being played by a white girl in makeup when Beverly Jackson was so terrific in the junior high plays.

"But she didn't try out," Mr. McCullough, the drama teacher, says. And when she hears that, Beverly has the good sense to roll her eyes and keep her mouth shut.

Not everyone around school is thrilled with all this noise. "I can understand what they're talking about," Lance says. He's the center on the basketball team, and if his guards want a black cheerleader, that's fine with him. "But I'm not going to let them spoil senior year."

And having a special election in October for a seventh cheerleader would ruin senior year.

But Skip sees things differently. He doesn't want his senior year ruined either, but he's got a hunch that what the black kids are up to just might be the making of his senior year. For Jeff wants senior year to be—

Emily sat up. She started to speak, then stopped. Jeff had been keeping score so the pad lay next to her right hand. She glanced at the boys; they were concentrating on the game. She picked up the pencil and wrote—"Did you hear that? He called you Jeff."

She nudged him. He read what she had written and looked up, puzzled. She took the pencil again and crossed out the pronouns in the last sentence. "Woody called Skip Jeff."

"Are you sure?" he asked softly.

"I'm positive."

He shrugged and played one of his two remaining cards. But it didn't matter; Evan took that trick and then the last one. Jeff noted the score, drawing a double line to signify the end of the rubber. "Why don't you see how the guys in the dining room are doing?" he said to the boys.

Emily watched them leave. "What do you think?" she demanded. "Why would Woody do that?"

"It's a natural enough mistake." He was scribbling over the sentences she had written on the score pad. "In his shoes, I would have done it months ago."

"Doesn't it bother you?"

"It's not like it tells us anything we didn't know."

He seemed so calm. "But what about the show, everything Woody's doing . . . doesn't that bother you?" If she were in his shoes, if she were teaching high school, she wouldn't want to be reminded week after week of what a success everyone had once thought she was going to be.

Jeff picked up the cards, circling each deck with a rubber band before slipping them into their case. "I suppose I'm used to it. Britta kept using bits and pieces of me in her drawings. I'd be making a slide of something for her and realize that one of the people had my hands or my eyes. It may not be great to be the model for a character on a radio show, but it's better than being split into fragments and used piece by piece."

Emily shivered. She had heard about some bad marriages, but that made his sound truly awful, a continuing violation of his integrity.

"I suppose I should be grateful that she was a children's artist," he continued. "So it only *felt* like a sexual betrayal without really being one."

A Supremes' song was on. Before it was over, all six of the boys descended on the kitchen. They had decided to abandon bridge and come listen to the radio show. Those that couldn't fit in the booth sat on the floor, leaned against the

wall, or hoisted themselves up on the counters, drumming their heels against the lower cabinets.

The rest of the episode was devoted to what had indeed been the making of Jeff's senior year. He had written an editorial supporting the black students' grievances, trying to make a distinction between grievances and demands. The subtlety was lost on the principal, who told him to rewrite it and then suspended him when, with Mr. Crockett's backing, he wouldn't.

It had ended three days later when a lawyer came down to the school, talking about the First Amendment and carrying a letter from the American Civil Liberties Union. The editorial was printed, Jeff came back to school a hero, and the principal, to the joy of both black and white students, had been routed.

But in Woody's version, Skip's parents had hired the lawyer. In life, Mr. Crockett had. Skip's newspaper didn't seem to have a faculty adviser, and Jeff's parents had wanted to throw him out of the house.

The boys were in rapture. The idea of being suspended, of standing up to the principal, of having a lawyer, was clearly replacing every other dream they'd had for their senior year. Now, Emily could tell, it would no longer be enough to do a good job, to win awards; they would also have to be suspended.

And it was also clear that they hadn't a clue that all this had happened to Jeff.

"So you haven't told them," Emily said to him once the show was over and the boys were filing out of the kitchen into the garage, where the basement steps were.

Jeff shook his head. "But if they do decide to do this race relations feature, I imagine they'll find out."

"Will that be awkward?"

"I'll survive." He stretched, linking his hands over his head. "But Woody does have the strangest timing. Here Leslie fell last week, and then what do you do but go and sprain your ankle? And now this is probably the only time I'll be listening with my students, and it's the one time he'll talk about the paper."

That was strange. "Well, I hope it's not the only time he

talks about the paper. I want to hear how much Leslie hated being asked to be business manager."

Emily had been business manager their senior year. By tradition, that job had always gone to one of the less talented members of the staff, someone brighter than the voc-tech people who sold ads, but not as good a writer as the people chosen to be editors.

"I know, I know," Mr. Crockett had said when he asked her to take the position. "This isn't what you expected, but if you do this, Emily, I'll have one year when I'll never have to think about the budget."

How could she have refused a request like that? His belief in her had been worth Woody's hoots and Jeff's raised eyebrows . . . and then, of course, she had loved the job. Her father had helped her, and for the first time she had understood how challenging a bottom line could be.

Jeff shook his head. "Did we give you a hard time about that? I'm paying for it now. There're times when I'd sell my soul for a business manager like you must have been."

"That's pretty much what Mr. Crockett said."

"Then that's what I should have said to Spencer. I asked him and he wouldn't do it."

"He must not like you as much as we liked Mr. Crockett."

She was joking. It was abundantly clear even to someone as stumbling and dimwitted as she'd been the last few days that the boys thought the world of Jeff.

But for once, he didn't seem to get the joke. "No, I don't suppose that they do." He slid out of the booth. "Come now, let's get you up to bed."

He put his arm around her waist and helped her out of the kitchen. At the foot of the stairs, he leaned forward and without warning, scooped his other arm under her knees and swept her up.

She started to protest, but the staircase was so narrow that to keep from being decapitated, she had to put her arm around his neck and pull her head into his shoulder. She could feel the tug and draw of his shirt across his chest, hear the faint thud of his heart, and smell the lingering trace of his sunscreen.

This was what she missed. Not sex's fireworks, the

exploding spasms of light, but the simple warmth of being touched. Sometimes she would go to Iowa to see her brother Wyatt's family. He had a baby, a two-year-old, a four-year-old, and she would gather them up—their compact little bodies, sturdy and delicious, smelling of baby shampoo and apple juice. The baby would rest his head on her breast, looking up at her with a toothless grin; the two-year-old would curl up in her lap when she read to him or reach for her hand at a steep set of stairs; the four-year-old would come up behind her, circling her legs with his grubby arms, and she'd almost cry, realizing that in the last month, except to shake her hand or put a light hand on her arm, no one had touched her. Sex was the price you had to pay for being touched.

They were at the top of the stairs now, and as she felt Jeff lower his arm, letting her stand, she knew that she didn't want him to turn, didn't want him to go back down the stairs and leave her up here alone.

She left her hand on his shoulder. Even when he was no longer touching her, her hand was still on his shoulder, and she looked up at him, not speaking, trusting that her eyes, her touch, would tell him what she wanted. His arms came back around her, tightening, and she could feel his breathing quicken. Then he kissed her, and all was warmth and rightness. This was what she had been waiting for, this connection with him, this completeness. She moved closer, opened her mouth.

Jeff broke free, stepping back so quickly that she almost lost her balance.

He grabbed her shoulders, catching her. "I'm sorry, but no. No."

She was too surprised to be disappointed. "That was a little too emphatic to be flattering."

"Oh, God, it has nothing to do with you. Don't you think that—Emily, I won't even *drink* in front of my students."

"No one's asking you to do anything in front of them."

"I'm on duty. I can't."

"You'd be back downstairs before they were up."

"I can't take the chance. It's not responsible."

Emily could not believe this. "Who would ever know? What—"

She stopped. In all the indignities she had endured as a single woman, she had never yet begged a man to take her to bed, and she was not going to start with this one.

"You understand, don't you?" he pleaded. "It has nothing to do with you. It's just that—"

"Oh, of course." Emily could feel cold, hard shutters snapping shut around her. She wasn't going to let him know that she minded, that she was hurt. "I understand completely."

He reached out to touch her, but he must have sensed the defensive shell that had gripped her. His hand dropped and he turned and left.

Emily sank down on her bed. His footsteps echoed down the attic stairs.

Not five hours ago she had decided that her relationships with men had failed because she had been so unwilling to admit that she had problems, and here she was doing it all over again. Was there any hope for her, any hope at all?

At least she had admitted to him that she had hated being asked to be business manager. Yes, the humiliation was sixteen years old, and so it wasn't much of a confession, but it was something.

She felt the cool ridges of her summer quilt. Her grandmother had pieced it while waiting for her first child to be born. The pattern was Wedding Ring.

And Emily thought about the last time she had slept with [redacted].

It had been an awful week at the bank. She no longer remembered what she had been working on, but whatever it was had been unusually stressful and time-consuming, keeping her at the office late night after late night, forcing her to work closely with people who neither liked nor respected her.

Finally, early on Thursday afternoon, the deadline was met and she called Jeff to tell him that she was finally done. He suggested that she come home and try to sleep for a few hours before turning back to all the routine business that she had been ignoring.

He had lunch ready. She ate wearily and then went back to the bedroom, taking off her suit and her blouse, slipping under the sheet in her slip and stockings, but she couldn't

sleep. She had drunk too much coffee, she was charged with too much adrenaline, and every time Jeff moved his chair or went into the kitchen for another cup of coffee, she could hear him. He too must have been able to hear her stirring, shifting about in the bed, rearranging the covers.

There was no point in lying here wasting time in the middle of the day. She was about to get up when he came in. He sat down on the edge of the bed, his weight tightening the sheet, making it hard for her to move. She couldn't remember if he had said anything, but in a moment, she felt his hand on her shoulder, her breast.

She stiffened, furious. Here she was exhausted, keyed up, having worked all night . . . how could he possibly expect her to think about sex?

"Close your eyes." He spoke in a soft voice. "It's just to help you sleep."

His hand was caressing her in a slow, delicious circle, and as she felt a similar warmth close around her other breast, she reluctantly closed her eyes.

Emily's usual thoughts during sex included, she knew, too much about the contract, the reciprocity of it all: *If he does this for me, then I must do that for him . . . now it is my turn, his turn.* But this time she refused such thoughts; he had started this and he said it was for her.

She let her mind empty, the jangle of interest rates and amortization schedules dissolving, leaving only the sensation of hands stroking up from where her flesh swelled at her rib to the bright points of her nipple, rich velvet to sparkling silver. She kept her eyes closed, hearing the rustle of his shirt against the sheet as he bent forward, feeling the stir of his breath against the curve of her flesh.

At first it was through her slip that she felt warmth and moistness. Then as his hands came up to her shoulders, moving against the thin ribbony straps, the touch was on her, the rough roll of lips and tongue. And below, between her legs, a hand cupped around her, resting firmly, not probing or teasing, just sending a heavy, languorous sensation even through the silky fabrics, a warmth pervading, tightening. Not until she began to move, her hips stir, did his slender fingers move, touching, caressing until the sensation tightened, concentrated, exploded.

And then she turned, guilty at her selfishness, at her violation of the contract. But he shook his head and pressed a finger to his lips. He settled her against his chest, her eyes closed again, and she slept.

He was still there when she woke, and this time she reached to him, not out of obligation, but from a warm and stirring desire.

Their encounters had always been fired by a competitiveness, a delicious little game of who could please the other more. But in the middle of this August afternoon they shared something more gentle, a passion the color of lilacs and wild sweet williams. It was new; it gave Emily hope. The scorching haze of the summer's difficulties was going to lift; they were going to make things work.

But the next afternoon, the very next afternoon, Britta called. He had gone back to St. Louis and had gotten married.

Emily could not sleep. She lay in her bed, flushed, listening, waiting to hear footsteps, to hear the door to the guest room open, then be eased shut. She waited to hear footsteps passing along the back of the living room, then up the steep flight of stairs to this attic with its dormer window, its rose carpeting, its bed.

The house creaked, the night sound of an old house. Downstairs, the refrigerator droned its low, steady hum. The streetlight shone through the window's soft curtain. There were no footsteps.

ten

Emily went back to work on Tuesday. Enough clients were in town that the agency had chartered a limousine for the week, and Crispin had suggested that the driver come out to Wilmette and pick up Emily. As comfortable an arrangement as this was, she came home from work exhausted and was happy to let Jeff and the boys minister to her.

Wednesday morning she felt nearly human and managed her trek down the attic stairs so quietly that she turned into the kitchen without any of its inhabitants realizing that she was there.

Peter, Evan, and Colin were in the booth, dressed for a day at the *Sun-Times,* eating cold cereal and supermarket pastries. Spencer had his head in the refrigerator. Michael and Clark weren't up yet, and Jeff was leaning against the counter, peeling an orange.

He was in running shorts, and his T-shirt clung to his chest in patches of sweat. A sweatband lay on the counter next to him, and his brown hair was tousled, the slight curl more rumpled than usual.

He hadn't looked like this six years ago. His legs were now a runner's legs, the muscles swelling, taut. His shoulders were broad, held back with an upper body strength that you

didn't get from running. He had the physical ease, the controlled motions, of an athlete.

And for the last four days, Emily had thought the reason she should be getting up early was to make breakfast.

He was laughing at something one of the boys was saying, and when he leaned forward to throw away his orange peels, he noticed Emily.

He stopped, the orange peels still in his hand. He knew—he had to know—what she was looking at, what she was thinking.

Well, what do you expect? Hang around in people's kitchens without your clothes on and they're going to look.

The orange peels dropped. He straightened. "Emily, I need to talk to you about something."

Curious, she followed him into the study. He closed the door behind them. She sat on the sofa; he leaned against the desk. She was looking pretty much straight at his legs.

Surely when all those pretty sixteen-year-old girls stayed after school to talk to him, he had the decency to wear long pants.

"I'm calling your bluff," he said.

She blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"Come home at two this afternoon."

"At two?" She was genuinely confused. "Jeff, what are you talking about?"

"I guess three o'clock would be okay," he said in a spirit of compromise. "We could speed a few things up although two would be better."

Then she understood.

It was really her own fault. Starting Monday morning, he had been trying so hard to show that he hadn't rejected her Sunday night, he had been so nice, so attentive, that she had not been the usual restrained Emily Gordon. When moving from room to room, she had held on to him instead of walls and chair backs. When she would lean forward to reach something, she would balance her hand on his shoulder. When she would speak to him, she would step close and speak in a low voice so that he would have to bend his head to hear her.

In a more flirtatious woman, none of those gestures would have meant a thing, but for Emily, who was always so careful

never to give the men she worked with the wrong impression, for whom there was little ground between a handshake and sex, they meant a great deal. She hoped she wasn't teasing Jeff—although she probably was. All she knew was that she couldn't help herself.

But leaving early on her second day back at work . . .

"Would you cut class to have sex with me?" she asked.

"Well, maybe not with *you,*" he returned. "But with lots of other people, sure. Especially if I didn't have to leave the school grounds. I think the janitors have a nice broom closet."

She wished he would be serious. He had made an impossible request. "I can't leave work either, and you know it. You knew it before you asked."

"I didn't *know* it," he denied. "Perhaps I had a fair inkling, a glimmering, an intimation, but it seemed worth the trip in here to ask you."

Emily gave up. "That's because it's easy for you to walk."

"You might have at least considered it. You said no awfully fast."

"I didn't say no to you any faster than you said no to me . . . well, at least you weren't much slower," she added, remembering Sunday night's lingering kiss.

"Are we turning this into a competition?"

"Type A personalities turn everything into a competition."

"I'm not a Type A anymore," he returned, "but if I were, a competition would be pointless because I'm right."

And at two o'clock that afternoon Emily had to admit he was right. She might as well have gone home. From two on, she did not get a single thing done.

* * *

On Thursday morning they left. The boys were loading the car when Emily came out to say good-bye. Jeff helped her down the steps, his arm around her waist lightly, even though they both knew that although her ankle still felt fragile, she was long past needing that kind of aid.

The boys all thanked her, Colin even offering to put her name on the *Herald*'s complimentary subscription list, an offer which she accepted sincerely.

"What good kids they are," she said to Jeff as the boys were piling into the cars. "I thought adolescents were supposed to be horrible."

"They are to their parents," he answered immediately. "They can be the biggest snots in the world at home. I'm sure they aren't anywhere near as helpful to their folks as they were up here. But I've found if you treat kids this age like adults, they will do their best to live up to that. Whenever we do something outside school, I tell them the truth, that they've got to behave because if they don't, it's my head."

"Does it work?"

"So far. But enough about that . . . what can I say to thank you for turning your house into a Boy Scout camp?"

"You can't *say* anything."

She was teasing; of course she was, but suddenly the arm at her waist tightened, pulling her close, and Jeff kissed her. And it was not a polite brush against her cheek.

She stepped back, a little breathless. She wished he had given her some more notice. Then she could have done a better job. "What was that about?"

He shrugged, his eyes shifting to the cars where there were, no doubt, six young faces pressed to the windows. "Oh, well . . . at least now they can go home and tell their parents I'm not gay."

"Is that a problem? Do you worry about that?"

"No, I don't . . . I mean, I *hope* it's not a problem." Clearly Jeff had not given the question a bit of thought until now. "I'd like to think that even if I were gay, the parents would know I'd never go near one of the kids."

"Well, any time you need help proving it again," she offered graciously, "let me know and I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you, Emily. You always have been a good friend."

"So when will I see you again?" she asked.

"Are you coming home for the Fourth?"

She winced. She always went home for the Fourth of July, but now . . .

"I don't see how I can. It's a week from tomorrow. I won't be able to drive that far."

"I'm sure your father would charter an airplane and build

the town an airport if that's the only way to get you home for a holiday."

The question was not what her father would do to get her to Nancy Hanks; the question was what would Jeff do. "Don't joke about things like building airports. There's too much money in those kinds of contracts."

Jeff laughed and said good-bye. Emily watched him get into the car and then waved as they all drove away. As Emily hobbled back into the house, she wondered why they had made no plans to see each other again.

* * *

When he got home later that day, Jeff was nice enough to call Emily's parents and tell them how well she was recovering from her sprain, an act of thoughtfulness she would have appreciated a whole lot more if she had told her parents about either his visit or the sprain. As it was, she had to endure a rather complicated call from them that evening.

"I'm fine," she assured them. "I can get around almost normally. I haven't driven yet, but I'm sure I could."

"But you'll be able to drive down for the Fourth, won't you?" her mother asked.

Emily was not looking forward to this part of the conversation. "I don't know. It's a long drive. If it were my left ankle, maybe, but my right . . . I'd better not."

"Do you want me to arrange some transport?" her father asked.

"You could take the bus," her mother suggested. "Greyhound comes right into town."

"We can do better than the bus," Jim countered. "Do you want to come?"

Although Jim Gordon was probably not going to build an airport to get his daughter home, he was entirely capable of driving up to Chicago to get her on Friday and then repeating the eight-hour round-trip again on Sunday. "Oh, no, it doesn't make sense—wait, I know, why don't you come here? Everybody . . . Wyatt, Leigh, and the boys . . . Kelly and Alex if he wants to. I've got the space."

"Come to your place?" Glenda was startled. "We can't do that. Where would everyone sleep?"

"You could have the guest room. There's a sleep sofa in the study for Kelly, and Wyatt and Leigh and the boys could have the family room."

"But what about Alex? Where would you put him?"

Emily had forgotten. In Glenda Gordon's mythology, she and Kelly were both virgins. "Alex can have the study, and Kelly can sleep upstairs with me."

"But you don't have cribs and a high chair. It will be so hard for Leigh if there's not a high chair for Peter."

"I can rent cribs and high chairs. And I have neighbors with kids. We can borrow what we can't rent."

"But sheets and towels, you don't have enough, do you? There will be—"

Jim interrupted. "We can bring sheets and towels. Do you really want to do this, Emily?"

"Yes, I do." She was suddenly very sure. "I really do."

"Fine. Then we will come, won't we, Mother?"

When Jim called Glenda "Mother," all discussions were over. "I guess it will be all right," Glenda said, "but don't worry about the food, Emily. I'll bring everything."

Five minutes later Emily was on the phone to her sister-in-law in Davenport, asking Leigh if they minded driving a little farther and sleeping in a basement with rented furniture. As she spoke, she was suddenly conscious that she was asking the whole family to change their plans on a week's notice. If the positions were reversed—as they usually were—she would have been furious.

Leigh gasped. "Are you kidding? You actually got your mother to agree to have a holiday somewhere other than Nancy Hanks?"

Emily paused. "Is that such a big deal?"

"I've been offering to have everyone here every Thanksgiving and Easter for the last three years. I wanted the boys to have some holidays in their own home."

"And Mother said no?"

"We never made it to a flat-out request. It was always so clear she wanted all her chickens under her own roof. But you were wise to start with something like the Fourth of July. Maybe it's not as important to her."

Emily had a feeling that it was every bit as important.

"Who knows? But Dad was the one who decided. Mother kept thinking of reasons why we all should go home. She did say she was going to bring all the food."

"Are you going to let her?"

Emily paused. "I guess so. It would be different if there were grocery stores in the Chicago metropolitan area, but since there aren't, I probably shouldn't get into a fight with her over who's buying the hot dogs." At least her mother was right-handed; she wouldn't leave the detergent on the left side of the sink.

Emily might not have been able to follow her resolve if she hadn't been so far behind in her work. But as it was, she really had no choice. There was no time to be thinking about freezing a lasagna.

A boat manufacturer was being sued for 3.75 million dollars; Todd Mansfield, a professional water-skier, was their spokesman, and the fourteen-year-old complainant, still recovering in a hospital, was telling the media that he had always had a poster of Todd over his bed.

Darrell Johnson, a light heavyweight contender, gave himself a concussion in a car accident although he had, only the week before, taped a Public Service Announcement about wearing seat belts. It did not help matters any that the passenger in his car, who hadn't been wearing her seat belt either, was not Belinda Johnson.

A photographer in San Diego claimed to have nude photos of Andrea Dana, an angelic-looking figure skater. Andrea claimed that it was impossible; Emily, who had known Andrea for a long time, was not so sure.

What little time she had to prepare for this second onslaught of visitors, she spent making sure that everything in the house was nice. Her new living room sofa arrived so she had the delivery men move her old one down into the family room. It was a sleeper, and she made up its bed with extra blankets because Leigh got cold at night even in the summer. Wyatt liked to read before falling asleep so she put a good reading lamp down there. Glenda was allergic to many flowers so Emily put only carnations in the guest room; in the basement and in the study, she put arrangements of zinnias and marigolds. She borrowed paperbacks from her neighbor, putting out mysteries for Alex, science

fiction for Wyatt. She bought pretty soap for the bathrooms and put sachets in the empty drawers.

And it was, she had to admit, much more fun than making lasagna.

Of course, within ten minutes of her family's arrival all these careful plans were turned upside down. When the hugs and kisses were over, Emily started directing people to bedrooms. "Mother, you and Dad are in the guest room, Alex, you're in the study while Kelly's upstairs with me"—she sent a glance over to her sister's fiancé, apologizing for this antediluvian arrangement, and Glenda took the opportunity to interrupt.

"Your dad thought that he and I would sleep downstairs with the boys."

"Oh." Emily was startled. "But I put the extra blankets for Leigh on that bed and—"

"It won't take but a minute to remake the beds," Glenda pointed out.

"Yes, but . . ." Emily turned to Leigh. "You don't want to sleep with the boys?"

"Not sleep with our children?" Wyatt answered for her. "Not wake up at one and take Andrew to the bathroom, then again at three for Josh's bottle and then at three-thirty because Peter is trying to get in bed with us? Pass up these adventures for a full night's sleep?"

Leigh looked torn, as if she didn't want to make Emily change her plans, but couldn't help being tempted by the quiet, pretty guest room. "It is nice of them to offer."

Yes, it was. Jim and Glenda were being nice; that was all there was to it. They weren't trying to undermine Emily's authority in her own house; they were trying to be nice.

Kelly suddenly popped from her perch on the arm of Emily's new sofa. "While you all sort this out, I'm going for a run."

"But you ran this morning," Alex said. "Aren't you worried about those shin splints?"

"I won't go far. I just want to loosen up after sitting in the car." She turned to Emily. "Am I going to get lost?"

"No, this neighborhood is your basic grid. But the high school's not far, I could run you over to the track."

"Oh, no, there's no need. I'll scoot out and be back before you know it."

Emily watched from the window as her sister dropped the tailgate of the station wagon, and leaned inside, rummaging for her running shoes. *Kelly's a compulsive exerciser,* Jeff had said. *That's how she copes.*

Emily knew what she had to do. If she was her usual self this weekend, if she insisted that everyone sleep where she told them to, if she hovered around the kitchen, fuming every time her mother put a spatula where she put a wooden spoon, Kelly would be out running three, four times a day. The pain in her shins would be so red-hot that the rest of the family would be able to use her legs as reading lamps.

Kelly might be forcing Emily to wear an Alice blue satin hoopskirt on Labor Day, but Emily still loved her sister. Emily turned back to her mother and sister-in-law. "Let's switch these blankets around. Mother's right, it won't take but a second."

When Emily came downstairs the next morning, everyone was already up. Glenda had found a mixing bowl and was making a meat loaf for lunch. Leigh was sitting in the booth, nursing the baby. Kelly, clad in a pair of running shorts and her beloved Chicago Marathon T-shirt, was at the high chair trying to wash yogurt out of two-year-old Peter's hair. Jim and Alex were in Gordon Construction overalls, measuring the wall next to the stove while four-year-old Andrew was trying to open the two massive toolboxes that were blocking the side door.

Before Emily could run screaming into the streets, Peter saw her and in his little voice, began to chant, "Hi, Auntie Em'ly, hi, Auntie Em'ly, hi, *hi,* HI!"

Emily went over to him; he scrunged his sticky face up for her kiss.

"Doesn't Peter give good kisses?" Leigh asked.

"He certainly does." Emily fumbled for a napkin and let her mother pour her a cup of coffee. She threaded her way around the construction crew—she had absolutely no idea what they were building—and sat in the booth across from Leigh and the baby. Josh was nursing intently. A little pink foot had slipped out of the blanket he was wrapped in. It was tiny and fat, with wee rolly sausages for toes.

In a moment or two, he stirred, and Leigh lifted him up. "Are you done? Do you want your Aunt Emily to burp you?"

At most family gatherings, anyone wanting to burp or change the baby had to fight with Grandma Postle for the privilege, but she was not here so Josh was passed across the table into Aunt Emily's not very expert hands. She settled him against her shoulder. He was so small, a little peanut of a person, no bigger than a good pot roast. She started to pat his back.

There was a banging on the garage door. Glenda went to open it, and Wyatt, also dressed in Gordon Construction overalls, came in, adding his presence and Emily's ladder to the kitchen.

What were they doing to her house that they needed the ladder?

Josh let out a nice burp. Emily lifted him forward and made a face at him. He smiled at her, his grin gummy and toothless. His breath smelled of sour cottage cheese. It was wonderful. Emily tucked him in her arm and wondered when . . . if . . . she was ever going to have a baby of her own. They were such delicious creatures.

Kelly released Peter from the high chair. He toddled over to the booth and peered up at Emily and the baby. "Baby, kiss. Baby, kiss," he chirped and tried to rip Josh's foot off.

Emily jerked back, sliding down the bench out of Peter's reach. He climbed up the bench in pursuit. Emily, who had in the past week proven herself entirely capable of standing up to a 3.75 million dollar lawsuit and a blackmailing photographer, did not have a clue as to how to stop a murderous toddler.

"Andrew," Leigh called to her oldest son, "do you want to come tell Aunt Emily what we do when Peter hits Josh?"

Andrew shot across the room, and Emily was subjected to a protracted lecture, invested with a four-year-old's high seriousness and incomplete understanding, about sibling rivalry, concluding with the advice that when you held Josh, you should read to Peter.

"If you don't mind," Leigh said, holding out a book. "This is a good one, there's something for grown-ups to look at."

Leigh was right. It was only an alphabet book, but the illustrations, while clear and bright enough for children to recognize, had little surprises, touches of whimsy that made Emily wish Peter were as interested in looking at the book as he was in turning the pages.

By the time they got to *P*, Emily felt that there was something familiar about the illustrations. She didn't really think she had seen the pictures before, but there were bits and pieces of each drawing that she was sure she recognized. She persuaded Peter to turn back to the copyright page. The book was only five years old; she couldn't have read it as a child.

And then she noticed the author's name. Britta Persson Grant.

The hands holding the apple on the *A* page were Jeff's hands; the eyebrows on the *E* page were his. This was what Britta had been working on during their short-lived marriage.

Josh moved in her arms. Emily looked down at him. His face went red, his head dropped down to his little chest, his nostrils flared, and he grunted dramatically. Very liquid sounds filled his diapers.

Emily thought it a highly appropriate response.

* * *

Sunday evening Emily, Wyatt, Kelly, and Alex took Andrew over to the high school to see the local fireworks display. As they were waiting to get out of the parking lot afterward, Wyatt turned on the car radio. It was tuned to his local Iowa station so he had to twist the dial, sliding past a commercial, a call-in show, another commercial, then pausing at the sound of a syncopated acoustic guitar skipping through a phrase, repeating the phrase, this time matched by the drone of a bass. It was "Suite: Judy Blue Eyes."

Sunday night, ten o'clock and Wyatt had found WRJR. Emily hoped he would change the station before Woody started to talk.

Wyatt was whistling lightly. "Hey, Emily, isn't this song supposed to be about Judy Collins?"

"I believe so."

Kelly sat up, excited. "Is it?" She had heard of Judy Collins. "That's neat. What does it say about her?"

"I can't remember," Emily admitted. "I think Stephen Stills isn't any fun anymore or something like that. But I must have the album at home. You can listen to it."

They stopped talking and drove home, listening to the tight harmonies, the simple but complete sound that many more complicated bands never achieved. It was a long song, and the high school was close enough to the house so Emily's sister and brother heard no more of Woody than him saying that this was "Suite: Judy Blue Eyes" by Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young.

As soon as they were inside, Kelly asked about the song again, so Emily went into the study, noting the red light glowing on the time-activated tape recorder, and started looking through her records. She found the song on Crosby, Stills, and Nash's first album, the one with the cover photo of David Crosby, Stephen Stills, and Graham Nash sitting on the front porch of a weathered farmhouse. The photo wrapped around the cover and on the back of the album, Neil Young was peering out a door from inside the house only half in the picture because he hadn't fully joined the group yet. Emily started to explain this to Kelly, then stopped.

This was a Crosby, Stills, and Nash song. Woody had said it was by Crosby, Stills, Nash, *and Young*. That was wrong.

Emily handed the album to her sister and went straight up to her room. She sat down on the bed and dialed Jeff's number. He answered.

"This is Emily. Are you listening to Woody's show?"

"Since I got back from the fireworks, yes."

"Did I hear right? Didn't he say that 'Suite: Judy Blue Eyes' was by Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, not Crosby, Stills, and Nash?"

"I noticed that."

He seemed calm. "Don't you think it's strange?" she demanded.

"I did. That's not something you would think he'd make a mistake about."

"For Woody to get that wrong—that's not right."

"Emily, I just agreed with you."

"And that's the second time he's made a mistake. Two weeks ago he called Skip Jeff, and this week he messed up on this."

"Are you suggesting that we call the F.C.C. because David Alan Woodman has been careless about details?"

He had a point. Woody was always careless about things that didn't matter, but Emily had trouble believing that, whatever the rest of the world thought, to Woody the difference between Crosby, Stills, and Nash, and Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young mattered. And it almost irritated her that Jeff didn't think so too.

"So how are you?" she asked, wanting to shake free from her irritation.

"I'm fine, but more important, Steve DeLoss is almost fine."

"Steve? Oh, that's right, he was resting his wrist, wasn't he?"

"He was, but it didn't work. So he went to Baltimore for surgery, and he's been at home this week, letting his mother take care of him until he can open jar lids and such by himself."

"Is she driving him nuts?"

"I haven't asked, but I think so. He had wanted to go to LeeAnn's, for which you can't blame him, but she—"

"For which *you* can't blame him." Emily remembered how taken Jeff had been by LeeAnn Summer.

"Well, I can't," he acknowledged. "If I had to choose between a week with LeeAnn and with Mrs. DeLoss, while it would be a tough decision—"

"Will you shut up?"

"No, I won't, because I'm trying to explain—and I'd be doing a much better job of it if I wasn't being interrupted quite so often—"

"Who's interrupting you?"

"Trying to explain why Steve and I are coming to visit you."

"What?" Emily sat up. "You and Steve are coming here?"

"Yes, we're—"

"That's great." Emily was thrilled. "When are you coming?"

"If you would shut up for one second, I would tell you."

Emily tucked the phone under her chin and leaned back against the pillows, smiling. "I'm all ears."

"I doubt that. Anyway, there's a physical therapist in Chicago specializing in musicians who thinks if Steve holds his violin lower, then maybe he won't have these problems again. He'll be working with her for a while, and he's too proud—and probably too rich—to hit on you for free housing so I'm doing it on his behalf."

"Of course, he's welcome. But what about yourself?" This was what Emily was really interested in. "Are you just coming for the ride?"

"Oh, no. Once again I need free housing—another conference, this time for grown-ups. It's for high school writing teachers. Carolyn Markowitz—she and I teach together—was going to go, but chicken pox hit her household so I'm going in her stead. She was going to stay with her sister, and she said I could stay with her sister, or maybe I could go beg the school board for some money, even though they already refused to do more than pay Carolyn's registration or—"

"Don't be silly. I have my entire family here this weekend. I won't even notice you and Steve."

* * *

Tuesday morning at work, Emily's secretary buzzed her. "You have a call from a LeeAnn Summer. She says she's a friend of Steven DeLoss and that you met—"

"That's okay, I know who she is," Emily broke in and picked up her phone eagerly. After meeting LeeAnn at Bobby Hutchinson's banquet, Emily had sworn she would keep in touch with her, but of course, she hadn't. "LeeAnn, what a lovely surprise! How are you?"

"I'd be fine if I hadn't heard such an awful rumor about you."

She didn't sound serious. "And what might that be?"

"That you're taking Steve in. Emily, don't. Believe me. He's a horrible guest."

"What on earth is wrong with him?"

"He's helpless. I mean, where do you keep your kitchen trash? It's under the sink, isn't it? And aren't your glasses in the cabinet over the dishwasher?"

"Of course. Or at least that's where the glasses would be if my dishwasher wasn't a portable. But what's that got to do with anything?"

"Everything. Just because you and I and the rest of the world know that that's where the trash and the glasses are doesn't mean that Steve knows. He doesn't, and he won't think to look. Give him a paper towel to throw out, and he will just stand there helplessly with it wadded up in his hand. Leave him there in the morning, come back in the afternoon, and he'll still be there, wondering what to do with that same paper towel."

"You must be exaggerating." But Emily could understand LeeAnn's feelings. She herself had dated several men whom she wouldn't have subjected her family and friends to. Just because you were willing to put up with the Jerk-of-the-Moment's selfishness and abrasiveness didn't mean you would inflict him on anyone else.

"I'm not exaggerating one bit," LeeAnn replied. "He wanted to come here after his surgery, but I wouldn't let him. Call him back and tell him to go to a hotel. He can afford it."

"I can't do that. Anyway, it'll be a nice change having a helpless houseguest. Everyone else I know is too helpful."

LeeAnn kept trying to insist, and it finally occurred to Emily that something else was going on here. LeeAnn might not want Steve staying with her, but that didn't mean she wanted him staying with some other woman.

The idea was almost laughable. Steve DeLoss? God only knew that it wasn't fair, but to Emily Steve was still the class wean. She remembered far too much of his awkwardness to ever think of him romantically.

But she could hardly say that to LeeAnn. Even if LeeAnn had chosen such a strange object to be irrationally jealous over, she was entitled to have that irrational jealousy respected. Emily had not found it one bit of fun when she had arrived at a party last year to find David Stahlberg, whom she had thought was the Jerk-of-the-Moment in her own life, there with another woman.

Nor, for that matter, had she been particularly thrilled when Jeffrey Grant had gone glassy eyed over LeeAnn.

Emily spoke carefully. "Actually, LeeAnn, I'd never put Steve off because he's Jeff Grant's excuse for coming."

"Oh." Relief and comprehension mingled in LeeAnn's voice. "But Steve said . . . I assumed you and Jeff had a very stable relationship."

"Oh, my God, no. I don't know if we have any relationship at all. Clearly we're still at the stage of having to manufacture excuses to see each other."

"In that case," LeeAnn said, "feel free to use Steve. I've always found him to be a fine excuse for a person."

eleven

Andrea Dana, Hemphill and Associates' star figure skater, had indeed posed for nude photographs, but she hadn't signed a release. Crispin Hemphill hired an attorney who made it clear that anyone publishing those pictures would be sued off the face of the earth.

The boat manufacturer for whom Todd Mansfield was a spokesman escaped being sued off the face of the earth when the young complainant turned out to have a father who had had three gin and tonics before getting into the boat on the afternoon in question. The suit was dropped, and Todd—bless his clean-living Mormon heart—immediately taped a Public Service Announcement about boating parties needing a designated driver too.

Darrell Johnson, the boxer who could not keep his pants zipped or his seat belt buckled, bought his wife a necklace with her name spelled out in diamonds. She in turn swore to the media that Darrell's companion the night of his accident was a friend of her little sister. The necklace was so gaudy that everyone forgot about the seat belt question.

Hemphill and Associates survived another week.

In between worrying about Andrea's nipples and Darrell's girlfriend, Emily did have some time to think about her own

life, most notably where her next set of houseguests was going to sleep.

Emily believed that she was always particular about whom she went to bed with, but history had shown that she was more likely to have sex with someone at his place rather than her own: the modern working girl, more willing to have her body intruded upon than her living space.

The only person who had ever slept with her in the attic bedroom of the new house was her sister. While Emily had enjoyed their late-night conversation, the whole weekend probably would have been easier if Kelly had slept elsewhere, if Emily's bedroom had remained her own sanctuary. Would that be the case again when Jeff and Steve came to visit?

She suspected that she was willing to share her body with Jeff. Her bedroom and bathroom she was not so sure about.

They were arriving on the second Sunday in July. Emily waited for them eagerly, and at the sound of a car stopping at the curb, she hurried out to the veranda, not even closing the front door behind her. It was Jeff's car, and he was alone.

She came down the steps. "What have you done with Steve?"

Right away he let go of his bag, dropped to the flagstones on his knees, his hands clasped in front of him. "I've lost him," he moaned. "Oh, God, Emily, I tried, but one blink and he was gone."

Emily was not used to having men drop to their knees on her front walk. The Grogans next door were working in their rosebushes. "Will you get up?" she fussed. "You're embarrassing me."

He rose easily, dusting off his pants. "It's good for you, Emily. You probably need to be embarrassed more."

"I take it you and Steve came in separate cars."

He nodded. "We'll each be needing ours. But I thought we'd try to stay together on the trip up since I knew the way here, but, Lord help us, he's the strangest driver I've ever seen. He stays in the right lane, no matter what. For ten miles, we followed this guy on a combine; he was going about fifteen, and like the noble human beings farmers are supposed to be, he kept pulling over to the shoulder and waving us by, but Steve didn't budge. We were on a divided

highway—the oncoming traffic was in the next county somewhere, but Steve didn't budge."

"So you gave up on him?"

"I did not." Jeff was self-righteous. "I hung in there until the farmer turned off, and so we were in great shape for a while, then something came on the radio, and I admit I started to listen, and in that three minutes I lost him."

"LeeAnn did say we'd need to keep him on a leash."

"If we ever see him again. I guess I'm going to have to call his mother and tell her I've lost him." He looked at Emily hopefully. "I don't suppose you'll do it for me?"

"You suppose right. But we can worry about that later. Come in out of this heat."

He picked his suitcase up and followed her into the house. As soon as the front door closed behind them, the suitcase fell, Emily felt a pair of arms circling her, pulling her close. Then he kissed her, a long, slow, lovely kiss.

What was wrong with her? Of course, she could share a bathroom with him.

At last he broke away, leaning his forehead against her hair for a moment before straightening and speaking. "There. I just wanted your new sofa to know that I wasn't gay." He gave the Regency-striped upholstery a little pat.

"Why do you have this great need to prove your heterosexuality?" Emily asked.

"Because it's a question upon which my current life offers very little evidence."

Emily was pleased to hear that. "I'm not doing so great in that department either."

"That's not what I hear," he returned. "Last month you were turning men away . . . which allows me to ever so deftly introduce an awkward question. You said you weren't dating this summer. Does that mean you've taken celibacy vows as well?"

"No, not at all. They are entirely different issues."

"So I can't ask you for a date?"

"That's right."

"But I can jump on your bones?"

"You put it so elegantly."

"Thank you. So I take it we don't care what Uncle Steve thinks."

"Oh, no. Of course, we care. We can't have him thinking that you're gay. Then he might trust you around that gorgeous girlfriend of his."

Jeff allowed as how that might be an advantage worth trashing his reputation for. He picked up his suitcase and followed her upstairs. She started to clear out a drawer for him.

"A good hostess would have done this in advance," he pointed out.

"And I'm sure when my mother starts having sex with her houseguests, she will put fresh shelf paper in an empty drawer." Emily finished and moved aside so that he could unpack. "Now tell me about Steve. What's he like?"

"A pleasant surprise. He's quiet, but you come away feeling like he'd be a good friend in a pinch. This problem with his wrist has hit him hard though. He's been with the New Haven Symphony for a couple of years, and I guess there was a lot of interest in him at some of the bigger symphonies. He had auditions set up in San Francisco and Boston, which he had to cancel. Then he was also in a string quartet that had just landed a recording contract with RCA, so he had to bow out of that too."

Emily imagined that such recording contracts were financially important to classical musicians. "That must have cost him."

Jeff closed his suitcase. "I don't suppose that bothers him any more than it would have me."

"Where is your money, Jeff?" Emily had been curious about this. He must have made a lot on his book, but he drove an inexpensive car and had mentioned needing a more solid financial base before entering politics.

"It's gone."

"I shouldn't be asking." Emily was mortified that she had done so. "It's none of my business."

He shrugged. "It's no big secret. My mother wanted my dad to have a single room in the hospital, and then after his second stroke, the V.A. covered six months in the nursing home and it took him seven and a half to die."

Emily was shaking her head. "I'm no socialist, but our health care policies—"

He waved his hand. "It doesn't matter. It's great fun to

have a book on the best-seller list. That's what that was all about for me, not the money."

"But it was a lot." Money was a grade card to Emily, a sign of how well you were doing.

Jeff sat down on the bed next to her. "Look, it's a little weird when someone you weren't crazy about dies. But, believe me, it's a whole lot easier when you've nearly bankrupted yourself on his behalf. That money bought me—and my mother—out of a lot of guilt. It seems like a fair trade."

"Seven years of therapy probably would have cost more," Emily acknowledged. She leaned against him. "It's nice to have you here."

"It's nice to be here."

"And it would be nicer still if we had some idea of how long Steve plans to stay lost."

"Yes, it would," he agreed.

But Steve himself probably did not know when he was going to arrive, so they straightened their clothes and went downstairs. About ten minutes later, Steve called from a phone booth in Evanston. Emily had to get out a map to give him directions.

When he finally arrived, he was very embarrassed about having gotten lost. His nervous mannerisms, the tapping foot and drumming fingers, were a steady accompaniment to his apologies.

"Don't be silly," Emily said. The truth was the time alone with Jeff had been a gift.

"What happened?" Jeff asked Steve. "Did I start speeding?"

"Not really. Well, maybe a little. Basically I don't like to drive on expressways, and I don't do it much anymore."

"Then you're wise to be so cautious."

* * *

Woody opened his spiral. He carried it around all week, jotting down ideas for the show. Then on Friday, he would get to work, figuring out the bits, planning which songs to play where.

But he was late again this week. It was one o'clock Sunday already, and he had barely started. The "Star-Spangled

Banner" spurted out of the tinny radio the counterman brought with him on weekends. The Rangers' game was starting. One o'clock and his show started at seven. He shouldn't wait this long.

Being cut from the football team—that had to be awful, really wanting something and then spending the rest of the year not having a letter jacket, not getting the special lunch on game days, not having that plate of gristly steak like the rest of the team, but getting wafer-sliced ham on a bun like every other jerk in school.

But that would mean a new character. Lance was into basketball, and he wouldn't go out for football if there was any chance of being cut. He and Skip weren't the type to take risks. So there would have to be someone new. Rex, Mike, Russ—Russ, that was a good name. But what about Russ? Who was he?

No, not this week. A new person was too much work, not when it was one o'clock already. He looked back down at the spiral. *Having the same dress on*—what about that? Spending all this time picking out a dress, getting ready for a dance, and finding someone else in the same thing. But that wouldn't happen to Leslie. Her mother made her prom dresses.

SAT scores—now that would work. Skip and Leslie cared more about the SATs than prom clothes. Especially Skip. He didn't just care; this was what it was all about.

So what kind of music went with the SATs? Hendrix, yes, Jimi Hendrix, opium den music, that mean, wailing guitar and the blues slur of the voice, hitting a note flat, then sliding up to the right place.

That would be what would happen to Skip. He'd hit the note flat, but then he'd make it, sliding up to the right place.

The final notes of "Are You Experienced?" faded.

Hendrix is coming to the city. Hendrix, Jimi Hendrix.

And it's going to work out. Cream came two years ago, but nobody had a driver's license and somebody's dad would have had to drive. You can't go to a Cream concert with your dad. The Airplane came last year, but on a school night. The city's only ninety miles away; everybody swore they'd make it

home by one, but Leslie's mom wouldn't let her go, and once Leslie's mom wouldn't let her go, none of the other girls' mothers would let them. It's always like that. If one mom says no, then all the moms say no.

"Did this happen?" Steve asked.

They were all in the den: Steve in the upholstered chair, Emily and Jeff on the sofa across from the desk. It was, Emily thought irrelevantly, how they had been sitting at Mr. Crockett's the night of the accident, only Woody had been in the easy chair, not Steve.

Emily answered his question. "I don't think so. I don't remember anything about Hendrix."

"But he's right about how Emily's mother never used to let her do anything," Jeff put in.

"She still doesn't," Emily added.

But now it's perfect. Hendrix is coming on a Friday, and the moms are letting the girls go . . . even though the girls would rather be going to Donovan. Keith is driving into the city; he's going to sit in line all night and get great tickets for everybody.

Then someone looks at a calendar. And there's some really bad news. Hendrix is coming the night before the SATs. That great electric guitar buzzing through your brain, frying out your eyeballs, and then the SATs the next morning. Maybe after Donovan. But Hendrix?

The SATs, man, they're college. You can't blow them.

Keith doesn't care. Hendrix is Hendrix. Everyone's going. The football team's going. Everyone except old Arnold. He doesn't know who Hendrix is and nobody invited him anyway.

"I did too know who Hendrix was." Steve glared at the stereo system resentfully. "I didn't listen to a lot of popular music, but Hendrix I knew."

Now, Skip and Leslie, they talk about it and talk about it, about what a hard decision it is, but they are lying. It isn't hard, they know, they both know what they are going to do. They sell their tickets.

"What weans, what nerds." Emily sat up in disgust. "They should have gone."

"Would you have really gone to a concert the night before the SATs?" Steve asked.

"Me? God, no. Not even to Donovan. But you would think poor Leslie might learn from my mistakes."

So everybody takes the SATs and then the big wait starts. It's not as bad as the wait around April 1 to find out if you've got to go to Podunk U, but this is the first big wait, it's your practice for the big April wait.

Now the SAT scores come in these strange envelopes, much bigger than an ordinary envelope, but with this window like it's a bill, only it's not, because inside is a piece of paper that's got two numbers on it, and they're your future, your whole future.

At least that's what everyone pretends. But getting into college isn't really the issue. What really counts, what really and truly matters about the SATs is not getting into college, but doing better than your friends. You have got to do better than your friends. You could end up at the land grant school with all the aggies, you could even be at state teachers' college, that would be okay, just so long as you do better on your SATs than all your friends do on theirs.

Now Skip has persuaded Dick to sneak home at lunch hour every day and see if the scores have arrived. One day, in government—they're in the middle of that let's-pretend-to-be-Congress game and everyone is sitting around pretending to be in committee meetings so Mr. Crumstead doesn't know who's where—Dick steps in with his back to Mr. Crumstead, flashes a big envelope. He's gone to Skip's house and taken it out of the mailbox even though Skip's mom was home and could have caught him.

"That did happen," Emily told Steve. "It was Cal Ridgebaum. He'd do anything for Skip—for Jeff, I mean. He always wanted to be smart."

Skip takes the envelope, and everybody's watching. Maybe he'd rather do this alone, but everybody's watching. So he's

cool. He opens the envelope, and cool, ever so cool, he looks at scores, raises his eyebrows, folds that piece of paper, puts it in his pocket, and turns back to his pretend-committee.

That was how it happened, exactly how it happened.

Leslie's not about to stand for that. She grabs the piece of paper out of his pocket.

"Did you do that?" Jeff asked.
"I must have."

Verbal—734; math—708. 1442. Not bad. Not bad at all.

Jeff cursed. Those had been his scores. Emily remembered numbers. She knew those had been his scores, too.

Leslie dreads going home. She's going to do worse than Skip, she knows it. She always comes in just a little behind him. So she takes the big envelope up to her room . . .

She had taken it into the backyard.

. . . and slowly, very slowly she tears the "Tear Here." Verbal—693. He's beaten her, he's done it again. She hasn't even broken 700. This is awful. Math—798.

Is that right? That can't be right. Seven Nine Eight. Two points below perfect. Higher than any score anyone at Written In Stone has ever had. Seven Nine Eight. For a total of Fourteen Ninety One. Skip was only Fourteen Forty Two. She's done it. She's beaten him.

"You're smiling," Jeff said.

Emily didn't answer. It still felt good. After all this time, it still felt good.

It had been such a shock, that she had done so well on the math part of the test. It made sense now. The SATs tested exactly those skills she now knew herself to have. But at the time, since she was on the newspaper staff, since Mr. Crockett was her favorite teacher, she hadn't thought of herself as a math type. That's why she and Jeff had bought a

book and reviewed geometry formulas and spent a week working algebra equations.

News about her score had spread quickly. The next day Mr. Crockett had come into class and sat on the edge of his desk. "Well, Miss Gordon,"—he had never called her Miss Gordon—"you seem to have gotten me into a great deal of trouble with the math department. They want to know why I am keeping you out of calculus."

Emily had thought that she would die.

Well, now, Skip can hardly believe it. It wasn't supposed to happen like this. He was supposed to do the best. He wins all the awards, he gets elected to all the offices, he's the star. He should have done the best on the SATs.

But awards are easy because you can fool people on awards. Speaking contests, elections, they're all easy because you can fool people into thinking you're the best. But there was no fooling on this one. And Leslie had done better. Fourteen Ninety One to Fourteen Forty Two. Sure the margin of error is more than that. Statistically, it was not a significant difference.

But it was. She had beaten him.

In public Skip dismisses the test. He doesn't want to talk about it—although he thinks about it all the time. He acts like he doesn't care, he makes sure Leslie doesn't know that he cares. He wants to make sure that she's not going to enjoy this. What's the point of beating someone who doesn't mind losing?

"Wait a minute," Steve broke in, as if he could stop Woody. "That's not right. You weren't that petty, Jeff. You couldn't have been. You would have been a good loser."

"No." Jeff shook his head. "Woody's right. I couldn't stand to lose. I was just more subtle than most."

If it had been subtlety, it had been effective. Emily remembered well. Jeff hadn't seemed to care; he had acted as if the SATs were nothing more than a who-can-sell-the-most-greeting-cards fund-raiser. Here she had been so pleased, so proud, so ready to gloat, and he had dismissed the test as unimportant. It had been a great disappointment.

But, of course, he had minded losing. Emily could see that

now. He must have hated it. Every day she worked with young people who had achieved an extraordinary amount, and she understood the odd combination of confidence and insecurity that drove them. Why would it have been any different for him?

"But you were so sure of yourself," Steve insisted. "You would have known how little those tests really mean."

"But they mean more than some award voted by the Chamber of Commerce. You can't fool the machines that graded those tests."

So amid all his success, that was how Jeff had felt—that he was fooling everyone. "But we didn't fool Columbia University," Emily said.

"No," he agreed. "That was the nice thing about that award. They judged the paper on its merits. We earned that one."

"When your book did so well," Emily asked, "how did you feel about that?"

"Surprised, grateful . . . but also deserving. I did a good job, the questions were important. No, I wasn't fooling anyone about that."

Emily liked such self-confidence.

The rest of the show was about Lance, Bobby Hutchinson's character. The football coach wanted him to try out for the team. He wouldn't. He knew he could never be as important to the football team as he was to the basketball squad; he wasn't going to risk sitting on the bench.

None of them knew if this had happened. "But the emotional logic is probably right," Jeff said. "I wouldn't have joined the chess team."

"Would you now?" Emily asked.

"If you're asking specifically about the chess team, the answer to that is no. But if you're asking whether or not I am willing to take second place now and again, I hope the answer is yes. Remember, I run with your sister and even though she's a girl and I'm a boy, her times are usually better than mine. I still run with her."

How few men these days were willing to admit that a woman had better running times than they did. Emily

admired Jeff's quiet self-assurance. Perhaps this was what had been missing every other time they had tried being in love.

The show was over. Emily took the cassette out of the recorder, labeled it, and put it away. Steve said good night and in a moment, she and Jeff were in her room alone.

She sat down on the bed. "Jeff, how is it going to be different this time?"

He drew back, puzzled, then laughed sheepishly. "I'm sorry. I was still thinking about those stupid SATs, and I couldn't figure out why you were going to take them again."

She laughed too. "No, I don't ever intend to repeat that experience."

"It might make more sense than what you're about to do."

"Yes," she agreed. "But since I'm clearly going to do it anyway, you might tell me how it looks from your perspective. Are we going to end up hating each other before Labor Day?"

"I hope not. After all, I'm not married this time."

"You weren't married last time," Emily pointed out.

He winced at his mistake. "I felt like I was."

"But that wasn't our only problem."

"No. But it should help this time that my father's dead."

"Your father?" Now it was her turn to be surprised. "What's he got to do with this?"

"Nothing, I hope. But he had a whole lot to do with us last time. Not all men are as kind to their wives as your father is to your mother."

Emily knew that. "Without my dad, Mother and I would still be living with Grandma Postle. No, without my dad, I'd be in foster care, and Mother would be in prison for murdering her mother." Emily stopped; she was getting sidetracked. "How was your dad unkind to your mother? He didn't abuse her, did he?"

"Not physically, but he wasn't faithful to her."

"What?" Emily felt her mouth drop open. "You mean he had affairs?"

Jeff nodded. "That's right."

"I had no idea. This was going on when we were kids? Did you know?"

"My mother made sure I found out. I suppose it was her last weapon against him."

Emily was still having trouble taking this in. "Did any of the other kids know?"

"I'm not sure. It wasn't something I was going to talk about, but I always had the feeling that Woody knew. The way he'd look sometimes . . . Oh, well, I suppose we'll find out soon enough. Old Skip needs to be a model citizen every bit as much as I did. It will be interesting to see if Woody understands why."

Emily looked at him, wondering just how "interesting" he would find such a revelation. Spending all his money on his father's final illness might have purged a lot of his guilt, but that didn't mean he wanted to hear about it on the radio.

"So when you came to Chicago to be with me," she said, "you felt like you were doing to Britta what your father had always done to your mother?"

"It was not one of my happier moments when I realized I was no better than he was."

There were, of course, so many reasons why he shouldn't have felt that way, starting with the fact that he hadn't been married to Britta, but reason didn't always have much to do with it. "So that's why you swore you would never leave her." He had said that at Bobby's banquet.

He nodded. "I will never again be faithless to a woman."

He was looking at her intently, the golden lights draining out of his eyes, being replaced by a question.

"Oh, no." Emily spoke quickly. "I wasn't worried about that, not for a minute."

"Then beyond that, I don't know the answer to your question. We're different people now. Six years ago you hated your job, and I didn't know it. I hated myself, and you didn't know it."

"Do you really think that it's that simple?" she asked.

He put two fingers under her chin, tilting her face up so that she had to look at him. "I don't know that we need to make it any more complex."

"I'm like Steve on the expressways. I don't do this often enough not to be cautious."

"Do you feel like you need to know me another twenty years?"

"I don't think I would mind knowing you another twenty years."

Just as she remembered, the light from the lamp on her nightstand turned the hair on his forearm a reddish gold. She curled her palm around the hand that was still at her chin, moved it up to her cheek, pressing it against her for a moment. Then she turned her face, kissing his palm, feeling the slight calluses of his fingers touch her eyes.

She knew what she wanted—for him to take over, for him to grasp her by the shoulders and push her back into the depths of her bed, for his body to drop on hers, his hands on either side of her head, taking his weight, taking the responsibility.

But that wasn't going to happen. This was her decision. If she took the initiative, if she took the hand that was at her cheek and pulled him down to her, then he would, she was sure, do his best to make sure that this time would be different, that they wouldn't go through all the same things again. But there was, on his part, too much consciousness of having once left her for him to do more than stand here with his hand at her cheek.

Emily broke free. She stood up, and rising on her toes, as she always had to do, she lifted her arms, lacing her fingers through his hair, bringing him to her.

At first, things, while not tentative, not questioning, were exploratory. Jeff cupped his hands around her face, and the kisses they exchanged were light, falling on cheeks and eyes and throats, kisses more tender than passionate. Instead of sweaty hands on breasts and thighs, there were long caresses of shoulders and arms, waists and backs. Jeff bent his head, sweeping aside her hair, finding with his lips the vein that pulsed in her throat.

Six years ago sex between them had been intense, something riveting and wordless, a high passion driving them, exhausting them, obliterating them. It had been a compulsion, a need, not even something that they could talk about.

But tonight was different. When Jeff stepped away from her to cross his arms in front of him and pull off his shirt, his eyes were sparkling with a golden light. From then on, they were hardly ever still, never lying side by side with only their hands at work. They were tossing and twisting, laughing,

getting so tangled in the sheets that they would have to stop and unwind themselves. Never before had Emily found sex to be such fun.

Gradually the frolic gave way to tenderness, a tenderness that Emily felt not just for this man, but for the boy he had once been, the boy so humiliated by his father's philandering that he could never stop trying to prove himself, he could never be less than the best.

At last, Jeff rolled over, laughing, breathing hard, an arm over his eyes. "What on earth am I doing in a job where I can't have a sex life?"

Emily pulled the sheet up and propped herself on an elbow. "What do you mean, you can't have a sex life?"

"Have you ever gone to bed with a kindergarten teacher?"

"No."

"Neither have I, but it's much too strange to contemplate."

"Surely there are other women in town."

"Not really, at least none whose friends don't want to host bridal showers. But it's mostly the kids. I mean, how would you have felt at fifteen, seeing Mr. Crockett coming out of Miss Filbert's house on a Sunday morning?"

Miss Filbert was the home ec teacher. "Me? At fifteen? I was so naive that I would have thought he was picking up something for the coffee hour at church. Teachers didn't have sex."

"My point exactly."

"But surely the kids now are a little more awake than I was."

"They're a lot more awake, but that only makes it worse. If they saw me coming out of Miss Filbert's house"—Miss Filbert was now fifty and stout—"they would know exactly what to think. But still they are happier if they don't have to worry about teachers having sex, and the parents . . . they're *much* happier."

"You're giving up a lot for your job."

"That's another reason why I'm not going to be in it much longer." He rolled over, facing her. "But enough of all that . . . I want to talk about you. Has anyone ever told you you look like Pinocchio?"

"Pinocchio?" Emily stared at him. "What kind of thing is that to say to someone you just had sex with, that she reminds you of something made of wood?"

Jeff admitted that it wasn't very tactful. "But he's the cutest thing with big blue eyes and chubby little cheeks." He reached up and pinched her cheek.

She batted his hand away. "And he's a *boy.*"

"So he is . . . which reminds me"—he pulled down the sheet she had wrapped around herself. "Did you really stuff Kleenex in your bra? Leslie does."

"Now that was really tactful."

"So you did," he crowed. "Then how come Woody knew about it, and I didn't?"

"If you say this to all the girls, I can see why you don't have a sex life."

"But clearly you quit. Because by the time I was in a position to acquire such information—when was it? during sophomore year—"

"Don't brag. It was junior year, after Eliza Sanger's party, and I had quit by then because I grew."

Jeff stopped talking and looked at her interestedly. "So you did."

* * *

As soon as she got to work the next morning, Emily called her mother. Glenda Gordon was not very good at talking about sex so Emily was blunt. "Jeff is in town for a conference, and he said that when we were growing up, his dad had a lot of affairs."

Glenda was quiet for a moment. "When adults have relationships, Emily, they aren't always innocent."

Emily, although virgin in her mother's eyes, knew that. "Did Mr. Grant sleep around?"

"I wouldn't put it that way."

Which meant yes. "How did you know? Was it common knowledge?"

"I guess. It was just something that people knew, but never really talked about . . . except at the beauty parlor sometimes. I suppose that's where I heard about it."

Her parents had often socialized with the parents of her

friends. Dan's parents and Jack's parents were in their bridge club; Kitty's parents were among their closest friends. Julie's mother, Woody's mother, and her mother were all in the same service league. Even Steve's parents were invited to their big parties.

But never Jeff's parents. Emily had asked her mother about it when Glenda was planning the Christmas party one year. "I'll certainly call Lil," Glenda had said. "I hardly know her, but I'll be happy to invite them. I'm just afraid that with the restaurant schedule, they won't be able to come."

Jeff's mother had declined, and apparently it had little to do with the restaurant.

"Did you know any of the women?" Emily asked, now curious.

"Not really, not socially. We were always so involved in the schools and the league that everyone was busy in the mornings, not that any of us would have at any time—"

"The mornings? It happened in the morning?"

"The Grants did have the restaurant, mornings were their time off."

"Mornings?"

"Emily, having it happen in the morning is no worse than any other time of day."

Emily supposed that that was true, but even though she had far more experience than her mother in how innocent adult relationships were not, she thought morning assignations were much sleazier than trysts at other times of day. And if she felt that way at thirty-four, what must have sixteen-, seventeen-year-old Jeff felt? No wonder he had cared so much about what people thought of him.

* * *

At five that afternoon Heather, Hemphill's receptionist, called Emily to tell her that Mr. Grant and Mr. DeLoss were waiting to see her.

She hurried out front. They were indeed both there, absorbed in the walls of the reception area, which displayed tributes to clients, covers of *Sports Illustrated,* layouts from ad campaigns, public service posters, tear sheets from

magazines and newspapers, all in chrome frames, beautifully matted in taupe, wheat, royal blue, and black.

Jeff turned at the sound of the inner door opening. "Could you get me an endorsement contract? I bet there's a lot of money in them."

"There is. What would you like to endorse?"

"Chalk. I use a lot of chalk."

"I'll talk to Stuart." Emily was suddenly conscious of Heather's interested gaze, and she hurried the men back to her office. "What are you guys doing here? I thought you had sessions until late, Jeff."

The two of them were already prowling around her office. Jeff dropped a glossy annual report he picked up from her credenza. "I quit, walked out, vamoosed."

Emily was surprised. "That's not like you. That's Woody. Woody walks out on things, not you."

"No, Emily, as usual, you're being insufficiently analytical—"

Emily might be insufficient at a great many things; analysis was not one of them.

"I'm not like Woody at all. Yes, I used to compulsively finish everything—and I'm sure you still do—while Woody, on principle, never finished anything. I like to think of myself as a Horatian Golden Mean, as halfway between your compulsiveness and his slob-o-ladom. This was a careful, weighed decision."

"So what was the problem?"

"They were talking down to us. The Great Heavenly Professors tripped down the mount to speak to us little high school folks. I went to a workshop today on Invention, and they were still preaching free writing, which we've all been doing for three hundred years. What we need is to start working on conscious idea generators. Carolyn and I are working on getting the kids to think their way through the curriculum, to develop a topic systematically. That's what we need help with, not *free writing,* for God's sake."

Emily blinked and turned to Steve. "Do you understand this?"

Steve had been playing with the pens in Emily's pencil cup, lifting them out, letting them drop back in. "I under-

stand now," he admitted. "Since I spent the last hour listening to him, and he can explain things when he puts his mind to it, but don't ask him to. It wasn't very interesting."

Jeff rolled his eyes and bowed. "That puts me in my place."

"So what do we do now?" Emily asked. "Now that we've got Jeff in his place."

"We play," he answered.

And so for the next few days, that's what they did. Jeff was appalled at the amount of traveling Steve had done without ever seeing anything except hotels with glass elevators and greenery-filled atriums. So he organized activities for them; no, these were not activities, they were field trips, class field trips. Steve finally asked if he should call home for a permission note signed by his mother. They visited the polar bears at the Lincoln Park Zoo, went to a wooden boat festival, a book sale at the Newberry, a Cubs game. Emily had lived in Chicago for fifteen years and she wasn't sure she had seen as much of the city in that whole time as she had in these days. Jeff was clearly the sort of person who never would have let the baroque painters leave town without his having seen them.

She tried to tell him this.

"I don't think you play enough," he answered. "Maybe you do go to expensive places with all those dress-for-success types, but it doesn't sound like fun."

He had a point there. "You know, you really do remind me of Woody."

"Oh, my God," he gasped and tried to look sick. "What a dreadful thought."

"No, Jeff, I'm serious. I don't know, you're more relaxed than you used to be, more fun . . ."

"I'm more willing to make a fool of myself," he finished for her.

"That's it," she agreed. "That's right, you never used to make a fool of yourself."

"It's teaching," he answered. "You've got to be willing to take risks, got to be willing to climb up on a chair in front of thirty adolescents, knowing that if you fall, it will be the high point of their entire lives."

"Woody would have thought falling off a chair a small price to pay to be the high point of thirty people's lives."

Jeff sighed. "I suppose you're right. That is like him. God, I'd better quit teaching if it's turning me into him."

"Then why don't you quit?" Increasingly, Emily didn't understand why Jeff lived as he did. He loved being in the city; why didn't he move here? What was keeping him in Nancy Hanks? Why didn't he start this consulting business he had talked about in the spring?

"Because I haven't fallen off that chair yet."

So he didn't want to talk about it. "Well, all I have to say is that you're fun, and you're right, I don't know anyone who's fun anymore."

He patted her hand. "That's okay. Once I stop teaching, I won't be fun either. I wasn't a bit of fun when I was reporting. This is only temporary—then I'll go back to being as boring as you."

"That's a relief."

* * *

Then he was gone. Emily tried to get him to stay longer, at least through the weekend, but apparently some textbook committee he was on was meeting Thursday afternoon.

Steve felt awkward about staying. "I can't go on imposing on you."

"Don't be silly. I want you to stay."

And she did. One thing she had not liked about her life before buying the house was that summers were never special. Summer ought to be different from the rest of the year; life should be easier, routines should be relaxed. Summer should be fun. Emily had heard of women who took their watches off for the summer. Emily couldn't have done that. She did the same thing in summer as in winter; she just got hotter and dirtier while doing it. But so far this summer had been very different, and if Steve stayed for another week or so, it would stay different.

She tried to explain this to him as they watched Jeff's little red Rabbit pull away from the curb and turn at the end of the street.

"I'll grant that I'm different," Steve acknowledged, "but if

you're counting on me to make this a fun summer, then you're in trouble."

"You're blond," she said. "That should count for something. Now I've got to get to work. I've done next to nothing all week."

Steve scratched his arm. "Maybe I could help with the cooking, the way Jeff did."

Jeff hadn't "helped" with the cooking; he had done it. Having spent his childhood eating in his parents' restaurant, he liked to cook and did a good job of it. "That would be great," Emily said to Steve. "But you may have to go to the grocery store. I don't know what's here."

"Fine. What shall I get? You'll make out a list, won't you?"

It occurred to Emily that Steve "helping" with dinner might be more trouble than Steve not helping. "Oh, you do it. I don't care what we eat. Get whatever you like to cook."

"What I like to cook?" He drew back in horror. "I can't cook, Emily, really I can't. I mean, I want to help, but all I ever make for myself is canned chili."

"Then we'll have canned chili."

"But I forget to stir it, and it burns."

"Then we'll eat it burned."

He managed. Emily directed him to a store that had a salad bar, so he had come home with salad, filets, canned corn, frozen cheese cake. The butcher had been a female and like many women was willing to go to great lengths for a man in domestic distress. Her explanation of how to broil a steak had started with how to turn the broiler on.

"That was wonderful," Emily said although she could hardly stand canned vegetables. "And it wasn't so hard, was it?"

"Yes, it was. I spent an hour and a half in the store. My mother used to shop for a whole week. I can't imagine how."

"Practice helps."

"Nothing will help me," he groaned.

"Shall we eat out tomorrow?" she asked gently.

"No, no. This therapist won't let me practice much yet, so I might as well do this."

So again on Friday he threw himself on the mercy of Margie the butcher, who, to Emily's joy, had a friend over in

the produce department. Tonight's steak and salad-bar salad was accompanied by broccoli, carefully steamed according to Angela's instructions.

Saturday chicken appeared. "Margie says we're eating too much red meat."

Calamity struck on Sunday. It was Margie's day off. "I hope this is okay," Steve said, carrying a platter out to the table. "Angela said a vegetable plate would be nice since it's hot out, but it doesn't look like dinner to me."

"I think it sounds great," Emily answered honestly although she would have said that if he had appeared with chili and hot chocolate.

He was still looking at the platter unhappily. "She said I should arrange the vegetables artistically, and I don't really think I've done that."

"Maybe it's not artistic," Emily admitted, "but it's certainly"—she groped for a word—"meticulous. Look at your zucchini—your slices are so uniform."

"I used a ruler," he told her.

"I beg your pardon?"

"A ruler. The book said to slice them a quarter inch thick so I measured."

"You held a zucchini up to a ruler?"

He nodded. "Actually I laid it down next to one and made little scores every quarter inch, then sliced it. That was the right thing to do, wasn't it?" He looked worried again.

"Oh, of course it was." Emily choked back a giggle, determined not to laugh . . . at least not until she could go upstairs and call LeeAnn.

"This I have to see," LeeAnn said at last.

"You really should. He's taking it all so seriously." Then suddenly Emily was serious herself. "You know, you should come up. I've got loads of room."

"Come all the way to Chicago to watch a disabled violinist measure vegetables? I don't think so."

"Well, the invitation's open in case you should change your mind."

For her own part, Emily liked having Steve live in her house. At first he had a slightly lost quality to him, the air of a person who did not know what to do with himself. She could not have stood that for long; passivity irritated her.

But learning to cook had given him something to do, and he was so pleased with himself that Emily felt almost maternally proud of him.

She certainly was not attracted to him. She had spent too much time with athletes to admire a man whose movements did not have either grace or power, and Steve, although not clumsy, seemed restless, physically unorganized. Perhaps because she was petite herself, his loose, rangy build did not appeal to her. She preferred Jeff's more compact construction.

So it was comfortable to come home to him and the dinners he had made, chat with him as they ate, help him with the dishes if she felt like it, and then go upstairs to her attic bedroom where she could be alone.

twelve

Woody crumpled the memo and picked up his Coke. It was empty. How could it be empty? He had just bought the can a minute ago. Maybe something had been wrong with it and it hadn't been filled right at the factory. That must be it. He couldn't have drunk it that fast. He couldn't have.

"What's the show about tonight?" someone asked.

Woody looked up. It was Janice, the weekend receptionist. She had pretty brown hair and soft eyes.

"I really love it. The show, I mean," she went on. "People think it's so great that I work here. Although Roger told me I shouldn't talk about you, and I don't."

She looked like she didn't understand why, and Woody forced himself to answer her original question. "It's about a new kid coming to school in the middle of the year."

She grimaced. "That happened to me. It was hard. I really hated it. It took so long to make friends."

"I kind of thought that's how it would be."

It seemed like time for a new person, someone safe, someone simple and nice, someone like Janice here who had a weekend receptionist job while she was in secretarial school. There were girls like that in high school. The new character was a girl, Connie June Hanson, and she was a nice girl, quiet and sweet, maybe a little afraid of Emily, and

a whole lot in love with Skip, but basically a nice girl. He had spent a long time figuring her out, getting her voice right. She was not going to get away from him like the others had.

It's five minutes into homeroom. The announcements are coming over the intercom, and no one's listening. Mrs. VanBank is taking attendance, and the door opens, and in walks this kid, this new kid.

Now it's not easy to be the new kid, to walk into a homeroom full of complete strangers, especially teenage strangers. But when it comes to things like walking into a homeroom full of complete strangers, C.J. Hanson is not just anyone. He knows that everyone will be watching him, trying to figure him out, and that's what he likes. He's going to make the most of it.

Mrs. VanBank puts down the attendance book and introduces herself to C J. She puts out her hand for his registration slip. C J. hands it to her, but just at the last second, the very second that's she's going to take it, he lets go so it drops to the floor, a little pink piece of paper fluttering down to the floor.

"Oh, ma'am, I'm sorry."

Mrs. VanBank says never mind and, because she knows it's hard to be the new kid in front of a homeroom of complete strangers, especially teenage strangers, she bends over to pick it up herself Now she's a nice lady to be doing that, but she's really not the type who ought to be bending over to pick things up, not in front of a room full of people, especially teenage people She's . . . well . . . she's a little too broad in the beam to be doing that.

And when she's bent over, in that instant when she can't see anything except that little pink piece of paper and the floor, C.J. leans forward and peers over as if he's looking at her too-broad-in-the-beam beam. She straightens and he turns away from her, toward the class, and winks.

Now everyone knows C.J. Hanson is someone.

Steve frowned and set down his wineglass. "Who is this? I don't remember anyone like this."

"I don't either," Emily answered. "Mrs. VanBank is Miss Rowart—she's been on before—but this C.J. . . . who came in the middle of the year?"

Steve thought. "Mark Horrigan, but I don't think it's him."

Emily could hardly remember Mark Horrigan—he'd been someone in the orchestra—and it sounded like this C.J. Hanson was going to be memorable indeed. "Debbie Tropiana came junior year, but it's not her either."

Before Steve could answer, the phone rang.

It was LeeAnn. "Are you listening to the show? I don't like the sound of this new character."

"What do you mean?"

"He seems a little mean. That's different. The whole time I've been listening, the world is mean—slippery stairs, lockers that stick—but the characters aren't mean to one another. He sounds like he's going to play practical jokes on everyone. Who is he? Who was your class clown?"

Emily thought. "Actually, Woody was the class clown, but I never thought of him as mean. A pain in the ass, but not mean."

"Do you think he's doing himself?"

"I don't know. He was never the new kid, but wait, the song's done, I'll call you back later . . . Oh, I'm sorry, do you want to talk to Steve?"

But LeeAnn had already hung up.

Emily sat back down, and within twenty minutes, she and Steve were sure. C.J. was Woody, but an extreme version, a nastier one. Woody had always joked about picking his nose to gross out a teacher, but he never did it. C.J. did. At the hourly newsbreak, she called Jeff.

He answered the phone. "Hello, Emily."

"How did you know it was going to be me?"

"And yes, I think it's Woody."

"Why am I making this call if you already know everything I'm going to say?" He laughed, and she asked, "Do you think there's something weird about this?"

"Not really. Self-portraits are bound to be either too negative or too positive. He's gone the too-negative route, that's all. I don't find that particularly surprising."

"Why bring in a self-portrait at all?"

"That I don't know."

"Are you saying that LeeAnn and I are getting too worked up over this?"

"I have no way of knowing whether or not LeeAnn is," he answered pleasantly.

"Oh, go to hell."

* * *

"Did you hear Cal Kirkland last night?" Stuart asked as he bounced into Emily's office Monday morning. "That new character, C.J., isn't he great? He could have been me. I was just like that."

Emily put her purse in her lower drawer. "Really?"

"Yes, indeed. That was me. I used to cut up like that."

"Did you? I'm afraid I don't find him a very attractive character."

Stuart blinked, and Emily glared at him with a resentment she knew she wasn't entitled to feel.

She owed her good summer not only to her house and her friends, but also to Stuart and Liz. They were both working much harder than they had in the spring.

Stuart's new housekeeper was a treasure indeed. She worked from seven in the morning until seven at night. She cooked, she cleaned, she went to the grocery store, she stood in line at the post office. In the evening, Stuart and Julia came home to a clean house, a hot dinner, and a baby ready for bed. It seemed to Emily that that was cheating somehow . . . certainly her mother would think that it was.

At any rate Stuart was doing an incredible amount of work. He was always available, he never asked anyone else to cover for him. And Emily couldn't believe that it would last. No one solved all their problems that easily anymore, especially not someone who was as cheap about paying for services as Stuart was.

There was no question, of course, that Liz's diligence was not going to last. All summer she had been in her "good" trimester. She had felt well, had plenty of energy. But Emily could see that starting to fade. The baby was due in late October and Liz was growing uncomfortable on long plane flights, something that was certainly going to get worse before it got better.

If it ever did get better. Liz was married to a man Emily

thought rigid and self-absorbed. The baby was going to be Liz's responsibility from beginning to end. She talked about not traveling until after the baby was born, but Emily couldn't see how she was going to be able to start up again then.

So while Liz was going to be taking care of her baby, who was going to be taking care of Liz's job? Emily had a pretty clear idea about the answer to that one.

* * *

Next Sunday night, after Woody played some songs highlighting Steve Winwood's career, C.J. got a nosebleed during biology class. Leslie was his lab partner, and he got blood on her new sweater. She went to the girls' room and rinsed the stain with cold water, but all she had been wearing under the sweater was a turtlenecked dickey so she had to put it back on. Throughout the rest of the day, the clammy wool against her skin reminded her of C.J.'s blood. She was miserable.

As soon as the next commercial came on, the phone rang. It was LeeAnn, wanting to know if this had happened.

"Not to me," Emily said. "At least I don't remember. But I might have forgotten. I think she's overreacting. Having your ears pierced wrong, watching a snake eat a mouse are worth going off the deep end for, but I think I could have coped with this."

"That's what I thought—that this was getting excessive. Maybe it's something symbolic, like the blood on Jackie Kennedy's pink suit."

Emily admitted that she was usually the last one on the block to pick up on symbols. "We should talk to Jeff. He's always on top of that sort of thing."

"Call him," LeeAnn said. "And let me know what he says."

So Emily dialed his number. She heard the click of the phone being answered, then his voice—"Yes, Traffic did start up again, but Dave Mason wasn't in it."

Emily blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

There was a long pause. "Emily?"

She acknowledged her presence.

"Oh, thank God," he sighed. "For a moment there I thought I had made a complete fool of myself."

"And who's saying that you didn't? But what was all that about Traffic?" Traffic was the group Steve Winwood had been in between the Spencer Davis Group and Blind Faith.

"Don't you remember? After Blind Faith, Traffic reformed with Winwood, but without Dave Mason. Woody should have known. I can't believe he forgot."

Emily had forgotten this segment of rock history. "And he didn't mention it tonight?"

"No, he slid right over it as if Winwood went straight from Blind Faith into his solo career. I can't imagine why he left it out. I thought that's why you were calling."

"No. I was calling about the nosebleed. I thought Leslie was overreacting. LeeAnn said maybe it had something to do with Jackie Kennedy and the blood on that suit she wore in Dallas, that maybe it was symbolic."

"Blood usually is. But I don't think the tone is right for it to be about Mrs. Kennedy . . . although I can't say I'd mind if Skip got shot. It felt more like guilt to me. Woody thinking that—"

Emily interrupted. "Don't you mean C.J.?"

"I have no idea—that's the problem."

"But what does Woody have to feel guilty about? Of course, if he really had ruined one of my sweaters, he should have gone into a convent, but he never did anything to me except tease me when Mr. Crockett made me business manager—and you did that too."

"And I have already apologized, but I don't think that that was his purpose in doing tonight's show, to apologize to you for that."

Emily didn't either. "But you think he had a purpose? You think he's trying to say something to us?"

"It's an arrogant assumption, but not out of the realm of possibility."

"Then let's get in touch with him."

"We already tried," Jeff pointed out. "You called, and I wrote him."

"But I didn't try very hard. Listen, when God comes down to earth and wins a silver medal in Greco-Roman

wrestling, Hemphill and Associates will be able to get a call through to him before he takes a shower. A disk jockey in Little Rock is nothing."

Jeff laughed, but only for a moment. "I don't know, Emily," he said seriously. "Perhaps you should save yourself for the Greco-Roman wrestlers."

Emily frowned into the phone. "You don't think we should call him?"

"To what end? What are we going to accomplish by talking to him? Try to look at it from his point of view. We're those characters now—Skip and Leslie. It's vital to his work that he think of us that way, that he remember us only like that. What would happen if we appeared on his doorstep, Leslie driving a BMW, Skip with a grade book, Arnold with his gorgeous girlfriend? That could affect how he does his characters, it might interfere with his creative process."

"So what are you saying? That we shouldn't do anything?"

"Yes."

Emily shifted the phone to her other ear. "I'm not very good at that."

"I know."

* * *

Usually on Monday, Stuart, Liz, Emily, and Crispin Hemphill, if he was in town, tried to confer with each other before nine o'clock when the phones started to ring. But on this Monday, Liz had a doctor's appointment, and Stuart didn't come in until 9:30.

"I hope nothing's wrong," Emily said, waving aside his apologies.

"Trina was late." Trina was his housekeeper. "She missed her bus or something."

"Things like that are going to happen."

He grimaced and they settled down to a review of the weekend crises. There had been no car accidents, no paternity suits, no fights with sponsors, no rumors of a stock market collapse, so in a few minutes, Stuart was standing up to leave.

"Oh, by the way," he said, his hand already on Emily's office door, "you did see the article in Friday's *Reader*, didn't you?"

The *Reader* was a weekly alternative newspaper. "What article?"

"The one on the show, the Cal Kirkland show."

"On the—" Emily had to stop her hand from going to her mouth. "You don't mean it."

"Sure. It was good—nothing we didn't know, of course, but well written."

Emily picked her pen back up and began to draw circles on the pad in front of her, small circles about the size of a dime. "You know," she said, trying to sound calm, "I'd like to read it, just for fun. I mean, it's not important or anything. Do you have a copy?"

"I don't, but I'll scout around."

Around eleven, Liz came into her office, wondering if Emily wanted to go out with her at lunch and look at cribs.

Emily didn't. Fortunately Liz had brought some baby-furniture catalogs as a substitute. She dropped them on Emily's desk and then started to rummage through them. "Oh, I almost forgot. Stuart said you really wanted to see this." She pulled a thin newspaper out of the stack.

Emily noted the backward *R* of the *Reader's* logo. "Did I? Oh, yes, I remember. Drop it in my box, will you? I'll get to it later."

The instant Liz left, Emily grabbed the paper, fumbling for the story.

As Stuart had said, it narrated the characters' history from the forgotten corsage in April to C.J.'s first appearance. The article was bright, funny, and very well written. A more serious sidebar discussed Cal Kirkland's knowledge and taste in music, his spurning of any rigid playlist, and his desire for anonymity. There was nothing else, no speculation about autobiographical source material.

But Emily didn't like it.

Since leaving business school, she had worked in the Chicago financial community and she had always been careful. She had developed a professional image that any woman would be proud of, one that was friendly but not

flirtatious, stylish but not sexy, interesting but not intriguing. The men she worked with always understood; there were never any questions. She had been careful.

The last thing she needed was to have everyone know that she was Cal Kirkland's Leslie.

* * *

Janice, the weekend receptionist, stopped Woody. "I don't know if you could use this . . . but I've noticed how you've been bringing in a six-pack of Coke and it must get pretty hot by the end of the show so I thought maybe this little cooler . . ."

She held out an ice chest designed to hold six cans.

Woody looked down at her. She was so pretty, so timid. He felt about a thousand years old. "That's nice of you, it really is." He took the cooler, put his six-pack in it, showing her how it fit. "This will be great. I know it will." He didn't tell her that he usually drank all the Coke before it had a chance to get hot.

He balanced the cooler on the pile of records, carried them down the hall to the news studio, which was separated from the main studio by soundproof glass. Don Darling, the afternoon man, nodded at him through the glass and lightly tapped a pile of carts, showing Woody that he had already pulled them. That was a traditional courtesy; the outgoing jock organized the taped commercials for the first half hour of the next man's show.

Woody nodded back, eased into one of the canvas director's chairs, unhooked a Coke from the six-pack, and opened his spiral.

The page was blank.

Blank? How could it be blank? It must be a mistake. He pulled off the rubber band that held shut the used pages. No, the last page was last week's show. Where was what he had planned for this week?

He riffled through the rest of the book. Maybe he'd started writing on the wrong page. No, all the other pages were blank. He didn't have any material. His show was starting in fifteen minutes, he had to go to the bathroom, and he didn't have any material.

How could he have done that? Have chosen the records and not planned any bits?

Frantically, he scanned through the used pages, looking at the things he hadn't used, the rejects. *Cut from football team . . . Pep Club elections . . . the Laundromat* . . . no, he couldn't do any of those, not without preparation. He kept hunting, pushing each sheet with his thumb, almost ripping them out of the book. *The Roman banquet . . . the trophy case* . . . God, these were terrible ideas. That's why he hadn't done them. *A new principal . . . the lake house . . .*

The lake house . . . He could do the lake house. It wouldn't quite fit the music—what did he have tonight? Mostly Stones—"Factory Girl," "Let It Bleed"—some Black Sabbath and Iron Maiden, but it would have to do.

Although they are good about pretending that it isn't so, Leslie's folks have more money than a lot of other people's folks, and one thing that they have is a house out at the lake. When Leslie was a little girl, her folks would always have her birthday parties out there. All the boys and girls would get to swim and run and jump off the dock and play with the boats before the cake and ice cream. Since she turned sixteen, her folks have started letting her take her friends out there. Not all her friends, just the ones like Skip, the ones who can be trusted. They trust Skip and Leslie, they know that Skip and Leslie obey the rules.

So it's not like Skip and Leslie and their friends do anything out at the lake house that they couldn't do sitting around someone's basement. They don't drink, they don't smoke. They play Risk, they play Diplomacy, and one night when they were really bored, they worked all the crossword puzzles in the back of the *TV Guides*.

It gets to be known around school, that they all go out to the lake house, and everybody thinks that they drink and smoke out there and maybe even go skinny dipping, and no one would ever believe, not for one second, that they are all out there working crossword puzzles in the back of the *TV Guides*. So these other kids are always asking to come, and Leslie and her friends tell them that they can't. They don't tell them it's because Leslie's folks insist on knowing everyone who goes.

They just get all mysterious and say "We're sorry, but it won't work." Skip, of course, loves saying that. It makes him feel important. Nobody but the original band gets to come out to the lake house, not even Arnold, even though he doesn't drink or smoke. But that's okay because he wouldn't do very well on the *TV Guide* crossword puzzles.

"That's not right, is it?" Emily turned to Steve. "You came out to the lake house, didn't you? We must have included you."

Steve shook his head.

"We didn't? That's awful."

"Don't worry about it," Steve said. "It was a long time ago."

Emily persisted. "Would you have liked to have come?"

"Oh, I suppose. I mean, I did know that you were going, but, Emily, don't feel bad. It shouldn't have mattered, really it shouldn't have."

Which wasn't the same as saying it didn't matter. Emily shifted uneasily in her chair. How dare Woody make her feel guilty over something that had happened so long ago?

Now there is one other rule about the lake house, and that's that Skip and Leslie aren't supposed to go out there alone. You see, there's no porch light at the lake house. There is a light on the porch, but it's not really a porch light.

It happens all over town. A girl's mom and dad leave the porch light on. Her date brings her home at midnight, and if she doesn't like him much, she goes up to the door and that's that. But if she likes him, well . . . she stays in the car, feeling like since she's in her driveway, she's technically home—not indoors, but home.

So her mom and dad give her fifteen minutes and then on comes the porch light. It attacks, blinking on and off, on and off. Any girl who knows what's good for her gets herself into that house right fast.

So you've got these two kids who are in love, I mean, really in love. They are going to love each other until they die, but the late movie lets out at eleven-thirty, they've got to be back in Leslie's driveway at midnight, and the porch light attack starts

at twelve-fifteen. So even though they are going to love each other until they die, do they Do It? No. They bump and they grind . . .

Emily sat up.

. . . and there's some blouse action and a little bit of skirt creeping, but when it comes to actually making whoopee, they fink out. They're scared, man, they're scared.

"Factory Girl" came on. Emily got up, turned down the radio. "Something is very, very wrong."

Steve agreed. "It's pretty crude all right, but then so is this song."

Cal Kirkland continued. One of the senior cheerleaders was going to have to get married. People sniffed, pretended to disapprove, and were actually thrilled, talking of nothing else.

"Did this happen?" Steve asked.

Emily shook her head. "Not as far as I know."

Two of the girls' friends were talking.

". . . but I can't imagine her actually doing it, the details, I mean. You know, taking off her panties, spreading her legs."

And suddenly Cal Kirkland was talking about Skip and Leslie again. They had gone out to the lake house by themselves, just the two of them, breaking the rules, to be alone.

. . . and now there's this pressure, because other kids are Doing It. Nice kids. Sure, the greasers Do It, but now Tammy and Doug . . . that's another story. Skip and Leslie can't talk about it, but now there's all this pressure.

Skip and Leslie start to "make out." Neither is enjoying it, but both feel determined.

Emily was thirty-four years old, and she was embarrassed. It hadn't happened this way; it hadn't happened at all.

Steve cleared his throat. Emily glanced over at him. His

face was a dull red and he had picked up a magazine. He was embarrassed too.

For the first time since he had come, Emily wished that Steve wasn't with her. She wouldn't even want to listen to this with Jeff. Even though it hadn't happened, what Woody was talking about was too personal, too private.

She looked at the clock. It was quarter to eleven. How much could happen in fifteen minutes?

Skip and Leslie struggled on. Emily wanted to call to them, tell them to stop, that this was stupid, silly, that it would ruin everything for them. But they couldn't hear her.

At ten minutes before eleven, Leslie's skirt was up. At four minutes to, Skip's jeans were unzipped. And in the last moments of the show, the deed was done.

The two people in the room were silent, listening as WRJR switched to its own broadcasting, giving tomorrow's weather, reminding Chicago commuters which expressway was being resurfaced.

Steve mumbled something, then stood up. Emily felt desperate; she wanted to explain it to him, tell him that this had never happened, that she and Jeff had never made love . . . at least not like that, not in high school. But she forced herself to remain silent. What did it matter?

Up in her room alone, she sat on the bed, staring at the phone, willing it to ring. She wanted to talk to Jeff, she needed to talk to Jeff, but she couldn't call him, not after tonight.

What was wrong with her? Why was she letting some stupid radio show embarrass her? She picked up the phone, but when he answered, she wasn't sure what to say.

"What did you think?" was the best she could manage, knowing that he would know exactly what she was talking about.

"Did you notice that he didn't always name the artists tonight?" he returned. "Sometimes he only mentioned the name of the song. That's not like him."

Emily stared into the phone. "*That's* what bothers you?"

"It does suggest a certain lack of aesthetic distance."

Talk like that from him used to intimidate her. "You don't object to 'bumping and grinding'?"

"It is one way to describe what happened."

This was getting on her nerves. How could the show not have upset him, when it was so much like what had actually happened not in high school, but ten years later? "I'm sorry if you think I'm being a nitwit about this." She could hear how tight her voice sounded.

"Emily, what does this have to do with us?"

What did it have to do with them? Well, for starters, there was the way they were talking. This tense bickering, this was what it had been like that summer six years ago. They hadn't been like that in June and July of this summer; they had been able to talk, been able to discuss things without carping, attacking. But after one episode of Woody's show, they were right back to where they had been when they had come close to hating each other.

* * *

Monday evening Steve told her that he was moving out. He had gotten a room nearer the university.

Emily stared at him. "Steve, why?"

She liked having him here. It was nice to come home to inner every night; it was nice to have someone to talk to. When she had brought the *Reader* article home, he had read it, he had sympathized. She didn't love him; she was no more attracted to him than she was to her brother, but she had liked having him as a roommate.

And now he was leaving. What was she doing wrong?

"I've been here for three weeks already," he started to explain.

"Three weeks?" she interrupted. "That's not possible. It couldn't have been that long."

But it had been. Steve and Jeff had arrived on Sunday and Steve had listened to four of Woody's shows with her. That made three weeks.

He went on, saying that his physical therapist had told him he could start practicing full time and by Labor Day, he would be ready to audition again. Summer school was over at Northwestern; the music department was letting him have one of the practice rooms and he wanted to be close enough to walk to it, so he didn't have to worry about parking, so this, so that.

Emily listened unhappily. Of course, what he was saying was true, every word of it, but she suddenly felt that that wasn't why he was going.

She wasn't doing anything wrong. Woody's show last night was driving him away.

It must have been so uncomfortable for him, being reminded of how left out he had always been, being reminded that whatever Emily and Jeff felt about him now, in high school they hadn't really considered him a friend. Then to have sat through that sex scene, he must have felt even more unwelcome, more of an outsider.

She didn't know what to say She tried to reassure him, say that she loved having him here, that she would miss him, but it wasn't making any difference. He was determined to go.

They said good night early, and Emily was up in her room, getting ready for bed when the phone rang. It was Jeff.

Emily sank down on the edge of her bed and told him all about Steve's leaving. She couldn't help herself; she really was unhappy about it. She swung her feet onto the bed and slumped down against the pillows, feeling very sorry for herself.

"Maybe you've been giving him too much KP."

"No, he claims he's going to miss that and he'll be coming over on weekends to feed me." And then Emily told Jeff how she felt Woody's show was driving him away. "But I guess you wouldn't understand that." She could hear how petulant she sounded, but she couldn't stop herself. "The show doesn't bother you."

"No, it does. And that's why I called, to apologize. I'm afraid I wasn't very sympathetic last night, and I am sorry."

Emily straightened. She wasn't very good at apologies, and she had always taken some comfort in the fact that Jeff was worse. As a kid, he could never stand being wrong. But not any more. This was a man prepared to admit to being wrong.

"Of course, I wish the show didn't bother me, and I guess I've been pretending that it doesn't," he confessed. "That's probably why I was such a jerk last night. But I also think different things bother us. You're upset by what's in the show. I'm upset by what's not."

"What's not in the show? I don't get it," Emily asked. "You mean like his not talking about your father?"

"In part, and there's the accident too."

"The accident? What's so strange about leaving that out? He didn't have anything to do with it. He was still at Mr. Crockett's house."

"I know . . . but haven't you ever wondered why he left town before graduation?"

"Of course I wondered, you know that." She paused. "You aren't saying it had something to do with the accident, are you?"

"I can't imagine what else it would be," he admitted. "But there's other things missing from the show too. Why hasn't Woody done more with the paper? And why doesn't he do Mr. Crockett?"

Jeff had a point. Except for the one episode where Skip was suspended, the paper hadn't been mentioned and Skip's job as editor had been subsequently ignored.

"Well, I, for one," she said, trying to make her voice light, trying to show him that she was glad that he had called, was grateful that he had apologized, "am relieved he's not doing Mr. Crockett. I don't need to hear about Leslie's embarrassing crush on him."

"That's just it," Jeff answered. "Getting crushes on teachers is a part of going to school, and you'd think it would be such a natural subject for Woody, but so far all the teachers have been harmless buffoons or mild inconveniences."

Emily imagined that Jeff knew quite well how frequent crushes on teachers were. At any moment, a third of the girls in his classes were probably in love with him. "And it worries you that he's not talking about all that?"

"Well, maybe 'worry' is too strong a word, but I don't understand why there isn't more about the paper. Especially now that he's got this self-portrait. There's so much he could be doing with Skip and C.J., the competition, the envy. I figured that after that show about the SATs, it was going to be open season on old Skip. I can't believe he's not pursuing that, and I suppose—if we're being honest here—I do dread it. Every show that doesn't hash Skip's parental woes feels like a relief."

In high school, Emily had never given much thought to

how Jeff and Woody had felt about one another. She had a hard enough time dealing with boys' relationships with girls—which was, after all, what truly mattered—that she couldn't be worrying about their relationships with one another.

But looking back, she could see that their friendship could not have been a simple one. They were both too competitive for that. They had chosen different routes to success—Jeff had tried to be Mr. Smooth, Mr. Perfect, while Woody had wanted to be declared an eccentric genius. But they wanted the same thing—attention, admiration, praise.

Woody had had advantages. To get attention, he was willing to risk making a fool of himself, and that was a risk Jeff hadn't dared take. Moreover, when Woody didn't do well on something, he could dismiss it as unimportant, as something only an apple-polishing goody-goody would care about. Jeff had to succeed at everything. When Woody wrote something for the paper that made the whole school laugh, Jeff couldn't say that that didn't count. Of course it counted. He would have killed to be that funny. And as much as he must have hated having Emily beat him on the SATs, he probably would have hated it more if that 798 had been Woody's.

But except for the SATs show, this was a side of Skip that Woody hadn't explored.

"It does seem silly," Jeff mused now, "to care so much about the past. But anyway"—his tone grew more brisk—"I had two other reasons for calling. Did you save your notes from any of Mr. Crockett's classes? If not from journalism, then from one of his English classes?"

"I don't know, but I would think so. Knowing me, I probably saved everything. Why?"

"After this stewing and fretting about what Woody might say about the paper, I went to school this morning and reread the issues from our senior year."

"You did? What were they like? Were they as wonderful as we thought they were?"

"They were better," he said bluntly. "I couldn't believe it. I had looked through them when I first came back, but at that point I didn't really know what high school kids could do, and I was judging them by pretty professional standards.

I thought they were okay. But now I know about high school papers, and my God, Emily, those were terrific. No wonder we got all those awards."

That was nice to hear. Even now Emily was proud of the recognition they had gotten.

"And frankly," Jeff went on, "I don't understand it. We couldn't have been that much better than my kids are today. So I figure it has to be something Mr. Crockett was doing that I'm not."

"And you think my notes would show you?"

"I don't know, but it can't hurt."

"Then you're welcome to look at them. They'd be in a box in my closet at home. There are two by themselves over in the back. They should be in one of those, probably the lower one. I'll call Mother, and tell her you'll be by. Now what was your second reason for calling?"

"To tell you that you don't remind me of Pinocchio anymore."

"That's good." During the nights he had been here in July, Emily had tried hard to dispel the image of herself as a wooden boy.

"You remind me of Merryweather."

"And who, may I ask, is Merryweather?"

"You know, Flora, Fauna, and Merryweather in Walt Disney's *Sleeping Beauty*. She's the one who has the chance to change the witch's curse. Anyway, she's exactly like you, blue eyes, black hair, cute cheeks. She's even wearing the sort of dress that I think you're going to be wearing at your sister's wedding."

"I really wanted to be reminded of that, Jeff."

"Of course, one of the reasons she's so cute is that she's a little on the roly-poly side."

Emily was starting to remember this movie. "Isn't 'a little' kind of understating it?"

"Oh, she doesn't have more than an extra seventy or eighty pounds, I'd say."

"That's wonderful. Is this my choice?" As delicately built Emily had never weighed more than one hundred and five pounds in her life, she could joke about this. "Between being a boy made of wood and a seventy-pound overweight fairy?"

"Take comfort in the fact that with that hair and those eyes, you seem to be the embodiment of one of Walt Disney's secret fantasies."

"Jeff, that is really sick, and I am going to hang up."

She did so, but two minutes later she was back on the phone, calling him. She had remembered something about her high school notebooks. "I want you to understand," she said briskly, "if someone has written 'Mrs. Jeff Grant' in the margins, it wasn't me."

thirteen

Watching Steve load up his car Tuesday morning left Emily with a forlornness that, by the time she was on the commuter train, gave way to a distinctly sour temper.

It was all well and good for Jeff to call last night and apologize, but the more she thought about it, the more dissatisfied she got. Why wasn't he here? So he thought about her when he watched Walt Disney movies. That was great, just what she needed in a man.

Well, didn't you decide that you weren't going to look at relationships as investments with the Big Payoff being marriage, kids, and a house?

Yes, but still it would be nice to have a guy who occasionally made plans to see her again.

What was he doing in Nancy Hanks that he couldn't do with her? She had a VCR; he could come here and find out who she resembled in *Bambi* as well as he could at home. He could read her old term papers here; she would even give him her used shopping lists if he wanted them.

Her train dead-ended at Northwestern Station, a dingy, grimy place. On track after track, the trains backed in, disgorging hordes of hurrying commuters. Emily followed the crowd along the platform. She coughed and waved her

hand in front of her face as she passed through the reeking gray haze that belched out of the train's one smoking car.

As always she had to wait at the revolving doors that divided the station from the new Atrium Center, a bright new complex with greenhouse windows and painted girders. The wait irritated her; someone had not planned this well.

The force of the crowd pushed her closer to the doors. Stepping in front of her, among the dark suits and somber dresses, was a bright yellow T-shirt. The wearer entered the revolving door just ahead of her. As she reached out to push the door's chrome bar, she saw, through the glass partition, navy lettering across the back of the shirt. *Skip Loves Leslie.*

Oh, wonderful.

A quick walk and she was at her building, glad that no one stopped her as she passed through the reception area and down the corridor to her office. She wanted to close her door and stew in self-pity.

It worked for about an hour. Then her secretary, Ann Marie, knocked and eased open the door. "Have you seen Stuart? Everyone's been asking for him."

"No." Emily looked at her watch. It was just after nine. "Maybe Trina's late again. He'll show up."

At ten his secretary called him at home, but got the answering machine. That didn't mean anything, Emily said when all this was reported to her. Stuart and Julia hated answering the phone at home.

"Why do you need him?" she asked each time someone stopped by to wonder over Stuart's whereabouts. "Is it something I can help with?"

"Oh, no" was always the answer. "I was curious, that's all."

Emily was getting tired of these inquiries. So Stuart was not in yet. Why couldn't everyone admit that and go about doing their work?

At eleven-thirty her door opened again. She didn't look up. "No, I don't know where Stuart is."

"Emily, could you do a gigantic favor for me?"

It was Stuart. "Where have you—" She stopped. She didn't care where he had been. "What do you need?"

"Would you watch Morgan for an hour or so?"

"Morgan?" That was Stuart's daughter. "She's here?"

Morgan was most indisputably here. Stuart was already spreading out a blanket as Morgan toddled in, clutching a woolly little lamb. "Come on, sweetheart. Come sit on your blanket and be a good girl." He turned to Emily. "It will only be for an hour. I swear it."

"Where's Trina?"

"It's complicated. I'll explain later. But Morgan will be fine; she'll be no trouble. You can go on working."

That was not the case. Morgan could walk. Morgan could pull drawers open. Morgan could pull things out of drawers. Morgan could push things into electric outlets. Perhaps a more seasoned day-care worker could have computed rates of return throughout that, but Aunt Em'ly could not.

She had Morgan on the credenza and was changing an astonishingly smelly diaper when the door opened. It was her boss.

"I see you have a little friend." Christian ruffled Morgan's hair and then sat down in Emily's chair.

Emily looked at him. "I don't suppose you know why I've been so honored, do you?"

"Trina disappeared."

"Trina? Trina the Treasure?"

"That very one. Apparently the people she lives with are refusing to admit that she even exists."

Emily pulled a new diaper out of Morgan's stylish diaper bag. "I don't get it."

"While Trina may be a treasure to Stuart and Julia, she's a prize of a different sort to our friends at the Immigration and Naturalization Service."

"The INS?" Emily stared at him. "You mean, she was illegal?"

"I believe so."

"You aren't serious, are you?" Emily snapped the crotch of Morgan's overalls. "This wonderfully stable, bilingual environment we've been hearing about was based on an illegal alien?"

"Apparently."

Emily dropped the used diaper into the trash. Her office was going to be a pleasant place this afternoon. She sat Morgan back down on the floor and gave her a stack of

annual reports to tear up. Crispin tried to discuss some business, but Morgan lost interest in her annual reports. Crispin stood up to leave.

Emily stopped him. "Do you know Liz wants to bring her baby into work?"

"I'm not surprised."

"You don't mind?"

"Not as long as the work gets done, and I imagine whether Liz brings her baby or whether Liz doesn't bring her baby, the work will still get done."

"Yes, it will," Emily snapped. "By me."

Crispin sat back down. "Emily, do you know why I am divorced, why my children will not speak to me, why my son gave my daughter away at her wedding, not me?"

Emily shook her head. What did that have to do with anything?

"Our clients pay me to run their lives. I'll tell them how to vote, I'll tell them where to go on vacation. If they can't figure out what to eat for breakfast, I hire a nutritionist for them. But only certain kinds of people want that. I learned that the hard way—it cost me my family. That's why I run this place as I do. I'm not going to insult you, Stuart, and Liz by thinking that you can't work out your own arrangements. If someone's paying me, I'll run their lives for them, make their decisions. But everyone else, I stay out."

"That makes it hard, Crispin."

"It would be harder still if I tried to control you."

* * *

Jeff had to smile. What an orderly creature Emily was. Her notes were exactly where she had said they would be—in the lower of the two cardboard file boxes at the back of her closet. He picked the carton up and was leaving her room when, from the corner of his eye, he caught sight of his own handwriting. Curious, he moved toward her bulletin board. Among the photographs and aging corsages was a yellow legal sheet. It was a draft of the editorial that had gotten him suspended. He must have given it to her, and she had saved it. What for? In case he had a presidential library in his honor?

At home he unpacked the box on his kitchen table. He first found the notes for one of her research papers, three-by-five index cards held in stacks by thick rubber bands. He put them back in the box so that if she ever wanted to know about the Hapsburgs again, the material would be waiting for her.

He started looking through the folders. He found the journalism material, notes from Mr. Crockett's introductory lectures on conducting interviews and pasting up layouts. Her handwriting had neat round loops and she had used all different colors of ink: red, violet, turquoise.

The next folder contained things from one of Mr. Crockett's English classes, drafts of a term paper she had written on Shelley. What on earth had Emily been doing writing about Shelley? She didn't have a Romantic bone in her body. Why hadn't Mr. Crockett steered her to Pope or Dryden, someone she would have had some sympathy with?

Mr. Crockett had obviously read one of the drafts. Along the margins, with arrows pointing to spots in the text, was his handwriting, that sharply slanted script written in black fountain pen. Grateful that this was summer and he didn't have a stack of his own research papers to correct, Jeff started to read. He tilted his chair back and, stretching his arm behind him, opened the refrigerator, snared a beer, and still reading, let the chair fall back in place.

The beer never got opened.

* * *

Stuart's daughter came back to work on Wednesday.

"I like kids," Emily overheard the agency's bookkeeper grumble in the ladies' room. "But it's the first week of the month. I don't have time for this. Why didn't Julia take her to her office?"

"Because," Stuart's secretary answered, "her law firm has the sense to have a 'no children' policy."

Although spared the company of her child at work, Julia Zorelli spent two full days—wasting a great many potentially billable hours—on the phone, looking for day care. So on Thursday Morgan was back in a center, but it wasn't nearly as convenient as the other one had been, and it charged a

late fee of two dollars a minute, with three late pickups resulting in expulsion. Stuart was going to have to leave work at 4:30.

It made for an awful week, much worse than in the pre-Trina days because Stuart had taken on so many new commitments over the summer. While Liz was willing to help put out the occasional fire, she said that it was silly for her to start working on a deal that wouldn't be closed until after her baby was due. Crispin was off in South Carolina negotiating with a resort about using their facilities for a training camp; that left Emily.

It made her glad that Steve had left. Through his stay, she had been careful to come home on time. His grip on cooking was too fragile to cope with late arrivals, and he was too pleased with himself for Emily to miss a dinner. She had been more considerate of him, she realized, than any lover she had ever had.

But now things at work were so overwhelming she couldn't be considerate of anyone.

It made her wonder about this pipe dream of having children someday. When she would hold her baby nephew, feel his downy little head snuggle against her breast, she would long for children. But then she would think about Stuart's wife spending the day at work calling every day-care center in the city, no longer caring what the place was like, what kind of care they gave, just praying for a vacancy. Did she really want to live like that?

It was nearly nine when Emily got off the train Friday night, and the evening light was fading quickly. Her house had a dark, forlorn look. If she was to continue working this late, perhaps she should leave some lights on.

As she made her way up the front walk, a man stepped out of the deep shadows of the veranda. Emily drew in a sharp breath, then relaxed. It was Jeff.

"Jeff!" She hurried up the front walk. "I had no idea you were coming. Have you been waiting for hours and hours? Why didn't you call?"

He didn't answer until she was on the porch. "Have you seen these?" He was holding some papers.

That was all he said. *Have you seen these?* Emily took the

papers and had to tilt them up to the streetlight. She recognized her own handwriting, rounder than it was now, less uniform, the slant varying. "Are those my notes?"

"Look at them."

"Let's go inside. It's too dark." Emily unlocked the door, set her attaché case down, and switching on one of the lamps, took the papers from him again. They seemed to be a draft of some kind of paper. She didn't really want to read it. "What am I looking for?"

"Look at the end."

She did. Clipped to the draft were three sheets of another kind of paper covered with another hand, a sharply slanted script written with a black fountain pen. "This is Mr. Crockett's handwriting, isn't it? Are these his suggestions?" She flipped through them. "I was certainly organized, to save them like this." She looked up at Jeff. "Do you write this much on your kids' papers?"

"Hardly."

His voice was sharp. Gone were all the high spirits, the exuberance, the teasing. This was a different Jeff. Emily did not understand.

"Read it," he said. "You'll see for yourself."

She started to read, then stopped. She was exhausted, she had had a miserable week, and she wasn't going to stand in her living room and read an almost twenty-year-old rough draft. "I'm not your student. I don't have to see for myself. Tell me what's going on."

"That's just it. *My* students do have to see for themselves, they have to figure things out on their own. I don't do it for them."

She drew back. "What are you talking about?"

"Look at what he's done. He's reoutlined your paper for you."

Emily could see that. After some prose comments, Mr. Crockett had written an outline, a very detailed one with *A*'s and *I*'s alternating. "So?"

"That's not what teachers do, at least not good ones. You tell a student that something needs to be reorganized, you help him see the problem, perhaps show him a little bit of the solution, but you sure as hell don't do the work for him."

"Are you saying he did?"

"Now read this." He thrust out some other papers. "It's your revision. It's absolutely clear that you are writing about some ideas you don't understand—"

"It wouldn't have been the last time."

"You use certain phrases, clearly things that you've heard without understanding. You've been fed this line of analysis, the thinking's been done for you. The purpose of this kind of assignment—at least in my mind—is to teach the kids logical discourse, to teach them how to analyze, how to structure an argument. But this"—Jeff jerked at the papers—"you don't learn from doing this."

"So what are you saying?"

"How well did you do in college? Did you do as well as you expected to?"

"Not freshman year, no. It was harder than I thought it would be. But I assumed that was because I was at U.C. It's a hard school."

"I was at Urbana. It isn't hard, and I had trouble. I didn't know how to think, I didn't know how to put together an argument. We thought we knew, but we didn't. Mr. Crockett did our thinking for us."

Emily sank down on the sofa, staring up at him. "Did he do this on the *Herald* too? Do you think he did too much on that as well?"

"Hell, he *wrote* the paper. That's why we won all those awards. No, no, we didn't win them—he did."

The Columbia award? They hadn't deserved that? "I don't believe . . . I mean, I do. If you say that's the way it was, I'm sure it was, but why would he have done it?"

Jeff shrugged. "I suppose winning was important to him, and he didn't care how he did it."

"That doesn't sound like the sort of thing a good teacher would do."

"No."

"Do you think he was a bad teacher?" What a strange idea.

"I think he was a very bad teacher."

There was still only the one lamp on. Jeff was standing in front of it, and the light outlined his form, leaving his features dark. Emily got up, turned on more lights, waiting until he sat down on the sofa, and then sat next to him. He

seemed pale. Usually his coloring was warm as if he had been fashioned out of golden August sunlight and rich Illinois soil, but tonight he was pale. "You're not like that, are you?" she said. "You don't teach like that."

Jeff shook his head. His brown hair was getting long; it needed cutting. "No, I don't . . . but only because I fight it every day. It's tempting to do stuff yourself because it would be faster and easier, but they don't learn that way." He rested his elbows on his knees, leaning forward to stare down at his clutched hands. "I idolized him."

Emily wanted to touch him. "Don't hate yourself because you judged him wrong. We all did."

He didn't seem to hear. "That's the problem with not having a father worth speaking of. It leaves a kid so goddamn vulnerable. What a trio we were—ripe for the plucking. Woody's mother being a widow, me with my dad, and your father, as great as he is, he's not your real father."

Emily considered Jim Gordon to be her "real" father, but she understood what Jeff meant. During high school when she had been angry with her strong-minded parents, she would think about David Sullivan, her long-dead birth father, about how he would have understood her, about how he would have let her do what she wanted. Her fantasies always ended up with him being a lot like Mr. Crockett.

Jeff was still talking. "I envied you so much, going to U.C. He was so pleased, so proud of you, and all I could think of was that it should have been me. I wanted him to feel that way about me."

"But . . ." Emily stopped. Of course, he knew that her going to Mr. Crockett's alma mater had been entirely a financial question; he had known it at the time, but it had made no difference.

"And Woody . . . Mr. Crockett liked Woody better than he liked me."

Emily spoke quickly. "That's not true. You were . . . you were everything. Mr. Crockett depended on you. Even if he did rewrite too much, he couldn't have put out the paper without you."

"I know that," he said impatiently. "I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about who he liked the most, and it was

Woody. If we were working late at school, and he went out to get us pizza, who did he ask to go with him to carry things? Did you and I ever hear him say anything about being divorced? Did we know that he smoked? No, it was Woody who knew all that. I know that he respected me, I know that he depended on me, but he preferred Woody. I worked so hard. I thought I deserved to be the favorite." Jeff stood up and crossed the room abruptly, but there was nowhere for him to go. "My God, it sounds so petty. I can't believe that I cared."

Of course he had cared. With a father like his, it was no wonder he had turned to a teacher for a role model. Emily herself had.

In fact, she suddenly realized, taking Mr. Crockett as a role model had led her astray, making her think she was an English major when her abilities lay elsewhere. But she didn't resent him for it; there had been no damage. Jim Gordon's influence had steadied her, had gotten her on the right path.

But there had been no Jim Gordon for Jeff.

And suddenly she saw it all so clearly. Jeff was living Mr. Crockett's life. He had his job; like him, Jeff was divorced, a solitary figure in a little town dominated by families. He had no friends, but half the girls in the high school had crushes on him, and the boys . . . hadn't Jeff said that two of the boys on the paper's staff were from divorced homes? No doubt those two kids turned to him the way he had once turned to Mr. Crockett.

Emily felt limp. Jeff talked about his job as if it were temporary, but he was making no effort to change. He loved being in a city, but he stayed in Nancy Hanks. The ideas about entering politics, being a consultant, were only ideas; he couldn't act on them because Mr. Crockett hadn't. Jeff was trapped, all his brightness and energy having no road to follow except the one Mr. Crockett had traveled. He was like the river doomed to flow in one direction only, unable to alter its own course.

Otis Redding had sung about sitting in the morning sun. Sixteen years ago Jeff had claimed this ode to passivity as his favorite song. When he was eighteen, those words had been

a dare, challenging anyone to think that he would ever have nothing to live for. But now the song applied; it fit perfectly.

* * *

Neither of them slept well that night. Jeff had not planned on staying, nor had he planned on leaving. He had come in a kind of panic, coming only to tell her what he had discovered, and had brought nothing with him but the gym bag that he always carried in his car. Emily was not sure, even as she was getting out clean towels, that he cared whether he spent the night on the highway or in her bed.

They did not make love, and she soon wondered if that hadn't been a mistake. He was usually a quiet sleeper, lying on his back with his fingers laced behind his head or with one arm loosely around her, but tonight he was restless, stirring and turning. He needed to be outdoors, on the track or along the highway, running, feeling the wind break around his body.

The light from the street lamp filtered through the curtains, leaving the room a dark gray world of shadows and shapes. Emily lay on her side, listening to Jeff breathe, wondering if she should speak. It was a long time before the pace of the week, the tensions of this night, overwhelmed her, and she slept.

She woke to see him over by the slipper chair. He was sorting through his clothes, picking out his jeans, his belt. He must have already been out for he was in running shorts and shoes.

The curtains were still drawn. Groggy from a too-short, too-heavy sleep, Emily switched on the bedside lamp. The light danced against Jeff's body, shining on the golden tan, glistening across the beads of sweat.

"How far did you run?" she asked.

"Too far." He found his clothes and crossed the room to the bathroom, opening the door, reaching inside to flick on the light. Then he turned, and silhouetted against the bright rectangle of the doorway, he spoke. "About last night . . ."

Emily struggled to sit up. *About last night . . .* That's what you said after having sex with a stranger.

"Again I need to apologize."

But his voice didn't sound like it had when he had apologized before. This time it was distant, almost cold. What had he been thinking about during that long run?

"I'm afraid I overreacted."

Emily shook her head. "No, Jeff. No, you didn't."

"We had a million bad teachers, so we had one more. It's no big deal."

"You don't have to pretend that it doesn't matter. It's not like he was just any teacher." Emily ran her hands through her sleep-tangled hair, pushing its weight back off her face. "He was everything to us, he was—" And now fully awake, she remembered the calendar, the clock, her job.

She cursed and flung back the covers. "Oh, my God, I'm supposed to meet someone for breakfast in an hour."

Jeff went still. "You have a date?"

"Oh, no. Goodness, no. It's a meeting. I know it's Saturday, but that was the only time." She started for the bathroom. "I don't know why I agreed to do this. It's Stuart's meeting, not mine."

"Then I'll get out of your way." He stepped away from the bathroom door.

Emily stopped. "No, no, you don't need to. Oh, Jeff, I'm so sorry. I had no idea you'd be here."

"It doesn't matter."

She didn't like the sound of that. Of course it mattered. She sat down on the bed. Then stood back up. She didn't have time to sit down. She had to be at the Palmer House in fifty-five minutes; she didn't even have time to shower. "I'll be home by eleven, I promise."

"There's no need to go into a fret over this. I don't need a baby-sitter."

And she tried, she honestly tried, but it was almost one by the time she got home. It was a hot, muggy August day. The city was blanketed by a dense air mass from the Gulf of Mexico that had been heated by its journey across the simmering South. Emily's blouse was sticking to her back by the time she turned up her street; she was full of apologies,

[redacted]

But Jeff's car was gone.

Gone? How could he have gone? She fumbled with her house keys, calling his name, hoping it would be like that

night at the banquet when her friends hadn't really left, when they had only been waiting for her outside. But this time he was not here.

In the kitchen was a note.

Dear Emily,

I suppose it is a dreadful cliché—not redeemed by my knowing it to be a cliché—to leave a note, but I'm supposed to see the guys on the paper this afternoon. We're doing an orientation issue so the freshmen will have something during the first week of school, and this is the last time the editors will all be together until Labor Day so there's no way to postpone.

I will speak to you soon.

Jeff

Emily stared at the note. He had to see the guys on the paper. What kind of excuse was that? He must hear excuses all the time—the cat ate my homework, all that—couldn't he come up with something better? Speak to her soon? He certainly would.

She picked up the phone, punching the digits of his number. The phone rang and rang. He didn't answer. She hung up, tried again. *Answer, damn you, answer.* What could she do to make him answer?

God, how careful she had been, all these years. There was a whole list of men to avoid: the recently divorced ones, the ones who had never had a relationship lasting longer than six months, the ones who wouldn't make weekend plans until Thursday. These were the men who ended up telling you that they weren't ready to make a commitment. All the hotshot lawyers and investment bankers she had recognized and avoided, then to be caught by Jeff—by *Jeff.*

A meeting with a bunch of kids—what kind of excuse was that?

No worse than a Saturday breakfast meeting for business. How could she have gone to that meeting? What had she been thinking of?

She sank down on the kitchen bench, letting the telephone receiver fall loose. It swung, knocking against the edge of the bench, still transmitting the sound of the phone ringing

through Jeff's empty apartment. It wasn't Jeff she was angry with; it was herself.

He had needed her and she had decided that her schedule was more important.

She had been so proud of herself because she had come home on time for Steve's dinners. That had been easy; she had put it on her calendar and done it. That had been the only demand his living in her house had put on her—being home on time. It was as if he had been practice, a rehearsal, requiring none of the effort a real relationship would have required.

Finally she got up, put the phone back on the hook, and for a moment stood still, one hand over her face. Then she crossed the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, stared in it numbly for a moment, and then fumbled again for the phone. Who would understand? Not her mother, not her sister, not even Liz. She found herself dialing the "919" area code.

LeeAnn answered.

"I've just made the most god-awful mistake," Emily said flatly.

"That sounds like man trouble."

"What else?"

"I imagine that you're usually upset about work problems."

That was true. Most women called other women to talk about personal things, about men or drapery colors, toilet training or preschool enrollment. Emily called to talk about work. That was her life.

"Tell me about it," LeeAnn prompted. "Was it Jeff?"

"Who else?" Emily sat back down on the bench of the booth again and to her horror, started to cry. "Oh, LeeAnn, I got home from work and he was gone and now I don't know what to do."

LeeAnn waited for a moment. "Start from the beginning."

Emily sniffed and did her best, telling LeeAnn about Jeff asking for her notes and about how he had brought them up to the city, what he had seen in them.

LeeAnn was amazed. "Mr. Crockett? Wasn't he the one you all idolized? Jeff must have been beside himself."

"He was. It was awful for him, a lot worse than he was letting on. This morning just when he was starting to talk about it, I ran off to a meeting. How could I have been so stupid?"

"Did he leave a note or something?"

Emily nodded, even though LeeAnn couldn't see her. "He said something about meeting some of his students. I don't understand. He sees them all the time. I know I shouldn't have left, but why couldn't he have waited?"

LeeAnn didn't say anything for a moment. "Emily, I don't know Jeff—I've only met him that once—but I do feel like I know Skip. Whatever Skip's doing, he needs to be good at it. Maybe Jeff needs to go get his hands on his students, to remind himself that he's not like your Mr. Crockett, that he is a good teacher."

"But if he's not Mr. Crockett, who is he?" And Emily explained how Jeff seemed to be imitating Mr. Crockett's life. "Is that possible?"

LeeAnn certainly thought so. "I was wondering why he was teaching high school. I know I shouldn't feel this way, but it didn't add up. He ought to be doing something else."

"I know," Emily agreed. "Clearly he's a million times more wonderful than Mr. Crockett. He could be doing anything he wanted. But what should I do?"

LeeAnn cleared her throat. "Maybe you shouldn't do anything."

Emily ran her hand through her hair. She really wished that people would stop saying that to her. "But I have to do something. I love him."

This was the first time in six years she had said that, thought that.

"Let him tell you what to do," LeeAnn said.

"He's not going to do that." Emily was sure of that. He hadn't been asking for her help this morning; he had been trying to tell her that he didn't need it.

"No, not in words, he won't."

"LeeAnn, I'm sorry, I'm not a subtle person, I'm not any good at this sort of thing. I don't even know for sure what we're talking about."

LeeAnn paused. "Do you know that I'm Cherokee?"

Emily blew her nose. "I guess." She didn't know much about American Indians: Cherokee, Sioux, Chippewa, she didn't know the difference.

"The Cherokee don't have a reservation in Oklahoma so I went to the state schools with the white kids. My grandfather told me it was disrespectful to question your elders, and I thought that meant I couldn't ask a teacher questions about a homework assignment. Cherokee children are taught not to put themselves forward, not to call attention to themselves. In second grade there was a boy in my class, and even by the end of the year the teacher thought that he only spoke Cherokee even though in fact his English was fine."

"That's terrible," Emily murmured, unable to see what this had to do with her.

"It is hard when white culture so rewards individual accomplishment. Anyway, a corollary of not calling attention to yourself is that you don't put yourself forward emotionally either. You don't ask for help, for support. A traditional Cherokee doesn't run around, spilling his heart out. What that means if you're living in a Cherokee community is that since other people aren't going to dump their problems all over you, you have to be able to sense their needs without them banging you over the head. This involves listening, not to their words, but to their hearts."

"I can't do that," Emily said unhappily. "I need to be banged over the head."

"You aren't that bad. But this does involve being passive in a certain way, in a very positive way, you have to be open to impressions, otherwise you are going to miss the messages that people are not saying. It's a way of dealing with people while still respecting their privacy. You can't grab someone by the shoulders and shake him back into mental health. It doesn't work. Ask the federal government. They've been trying to do that with the Indians for years and years."

"That's me," Emily sighed. "I'm like my mother, always so busy managing and fussing I can never hear anything but

words. So is this what everyone means by me doing nothing?"

"It only *looks* like you're doing nothing—the myth of the cigar store Indian. Did I tell you I was promoted at the beginning of the summer?"

"No. No, you didn't. But that's great," Emily added, knowing that she didn't sound very congratulatory.

"You can gush later. My point is that it's been my first supervisory position, and my first impulse was to overmanage, do too much, not let people make their own mistakes."

"That sounds familiar," Emily sighed. Those were all the mistakes she had made at the bank. And she remembered that Sunday afternoon in June when even though injured, she had been determined to supervise every bit of yard work Jeff's students were doing.

LeeAnn continued, "It's so easy to fall into the trap of feeling that unless you ride herd on everyone all the time, nothing will be done properly.

"So now I'm trying to trust people to do their work and to listen to them, listening in the way my grandfather would have wanted me to listen, so that I can meet their needs without them having to ask me."

Emily shook her head. "I'll never be able to do that."

"That can't be true," LeeAnn said. "You did a great job with Steve this summer."

"With Steve?" Emily had no idea what LeeAnn was talking about. "All I did with Steve was get home on time."

"He says you were wonderful about his learning to cook. You never fussed about anything being wrong, you always praised him for whatever he did right, you never gave him advice unless he asked for it. I don't know . . ." Now LeeAnn started to sound a little awkward. "Maybe if I could manage to be like that with him, our relationship would have half a chance."

"Don't make too much of what I did," Emily answered. "If I was like that, it was because I didn't care whether or not he learned to cook. If I had," she said almost bitterly, "I would have been out there, telling him every time he used

the wrong size wooden spoon . . . and he would have never learned a thing."

How hopeless everything seemed. Here she was, finally admitting that she loved Jeff and what had it taken? Learning that both of them had all kinds of problems that she didn't have a clue about how to solve.

It was enough to make dating look good.

fourteen

Woody crushed the paper cup and let it drop to the floor of his car. He was late again. He fumbled around the console, his fingers groping through the gum wrappers and gas receipts, looking for a fresh stick of gum. He couldn't find any.

At a red light, he unfastened his seat belt and opened the glove compartment. There were tire warranties, old maps, spare fuses, but no gum.

It wasn't possible. He always had gum. He needed gum. He couldn't warm up without it. That had been his ritual ever since high school. He'd made a big deal of it back then, if he was going to give a report or do something at one of the assemblies, he'd insist that he needed gum. Jeff finally started to carry some around for him just in case. Sometimes he'd lie and say he didn't have any so that someone, Emily, Dan, or Jack, would have to scurry off to find Jeff.

Jeff. He wished he could talk to Jeff. Jeff would know what was wrong with him, why he felt tired all the time, why he felt nervous all the time. If only he could talk to Jeff, if only they could all be together again, like in school, back when being disorganized and late was an act, a skit, not something that kept getting worse all the time.

But there was no way they'd ever be together again, no way he'd ever talk to Jeff again. Not after what he was doing.

* * *

Jeff paced about his small living room restlessly. Usually he saved some tedious chore for Sunday night, grading exams or during the summer catching up on journal articles, looking at other teachers' syllabi, paging through other schools' curricula. Tonight he had planned, since it was August already, to make notes for the letters of recommendation the seniors would be needing for their college applications in the fall. He had a pretty good idea who would ask him, and the letters would be better if he started drafting them now when he had more time.

But what was the point? Why not do what everyone else on the faculty did? Write the same letter over and over, and be done with it.

At seven o'clock Woody started off right away talking about Skip, ignoring what had happened out at the lake house the week before. Friend Skip was in a bind; all of a sudden C.J. was doing pretty well in history class . . . or more to the point he was doing better than Skip. Research papers were due. Skip worked and worked, but he'd listen to C.J. talk about his, and he'd know that C.J.'s was going to be better. His topic was more interesting. The Library of Congress was sending him research material. Skip tried to change his topic, but it was too late. There wasn't time, and the night before it was due, he found himself typing up something from a book he had found. He was plagiarizing.

Jeff found himself by the phone, waiting for it to ring.

No, Emily, I didn't do that. I thought about it once. I came very close, but I didn't do it. I never told Woody; he must have guessed. Thinking about me, thinking about what I would have been like, he must have guessed.

But Emily was not going to call. That he was sure of.

Skip got away with it; the teacher never found out. But C.J. did not get away with what he did, turning in no paper at all.

At seven-thirty, C.J. started experimenting with drugs.

I don't know if that happened, Emily. I honestly don't.

But Emily was not going to call.

C.J. was bragging about it, telling other people, but then he would stop and plead, "Don't tell Skip. Be sure that you don't tell Skip."

What is it, Woody? What don't you want me to know?

Jeff went outside, the sounds of the radio filtering through the screen door, blending with the chirp of the crickets and the occasional drone of a passing car. He sat down, leaning back against the house, one elbow resting on a bent knee.

And even out here, he felt like Woody was talking to him, trying to say something to him.

* * *

At eight, Cal Kirkland had bad news for his Skip-and-Leslie fans. It was the Monday after they had been out at the lake house, and the two hardly looked at each other during homeroom, then they had a big fight at lunch. In history class, Leslie told her friends Skip was no fun anymore. Skip told his friends he was tired of being tied down.

The truth is they feel so guilty about what happened at the lake house that they can't stand to be together. They've done something really terrible and they can't face each other. And so it's over, splitsville, the end of SkipandLeslie, LeslieandSkip.

Now old C.J., he finds this a riot. He really does. He's gotten dead sick of Skip and Leslie and the fact that they've got something he doesn't. He tells Arnold that they've broken up.

"And do you know why she did it?" he says.

Now Arnold doesn't know; of course Arnold doesn't know: Arnold doesn't know anything.

"She did it because of you," C.J. says.

"Because of me?" Arnold is amazed. "Me?"

"Yeah, she loves you."

Arnold cannot believe this. Leslie. Leslie! He thinks Leslie's great; he always has.

"She wants you to ask her out."

"She does?"

"Yeah, I know she does. Look, there she is. Go ask her if you can carry her books."

Steve had come over to Emily's on Saturday night to make dinner. He had made a pasta primavera with an ice cream

pie for dessert. They had had quite a nice time, but he had said nothing about coming back on Sunday night to drink wine and listen to the show. And as she heard what Woody was saying, Emily was glad that he wasn't here.

Well, you all know that Leslie doesn't love Arnold; she hardly knows that Arnold exists. But Arnold wants to believe C.J., there's nothing he wants more than to believe C.J. and so he walks down the hall and asks her if he can carry her books.

The thing is Leslie's on her way to tutor some stupid little freshman, and as C.J. saw perfectly well, she's not carrying any books. Not a one. What's she supposed to do? Go back to her locker, get some books, so that Arnold can carry them? Anyway, carrying books is a big deal, a girl can't go around handing her books to anyone. What if it was someone who wanted to steal her math homework?

Leslie looks at Arnold like he's a worm, like he's the wrong size bra or a garter belt with the elastic stretched out. "But I'm not carrying any books, Arnold," she says.

Emily stood up. The wrong size bra or an old garter belt—that wasn't funny. And it wasn't Woody; it was C.J. Woody wouldn't have had Skip plagiarize a paper; that too was C.J. He had taken over the show.

She couldn't imagine that Jeff had ever plagiarized a paper. He might have been tempted, especially, if Woody had been—

She buried her face in her hands, suddenly so sick of this. She was sick of listening to the show, trying to figure out what had happened and what hadn't. She was sick of hearing about Skip and Leslie, she was sick of feeling responsible for everything that Leslie had done.

All summer long the show had run her life. She had listened to every episode. But she had a choice; no one was forcing her to listen.

And she wasn't going to. She crossed the room, turned off the receiver, switched off the tape, and unplugged the timer. The room seemed very quiet. For a moment, she wasn't sure what to do with herself.

She drifted out to the backyard. The little white blossoms of the English daisies gleamed in the fading light. She hadn't

planted any annuals this year. She had been lucky to have the dainty blue columbines in June and these daisies now.

It was eight-thirty. Most women her age were running the kids' bathwater, hunting for clean pajamas, wondering what there was in the refrigerator for tomorrow's day-camp lunches. Yes, Emily envied them their children, but perhaps they envied her these moments of tranquillity when she had no one to answer to but herself, no one to please but herself. Perhaps those other women did have the better end of the stick, but that was no reason not to enjoy what she did have.

For forty-five minutes there was enough light to weed the pachysandra that curved around the edge of grass near the sugar maples. When it was dark, she went into the house and from her linen closet took out a little wicker gift basket full of lotions and scented soaps.

No one ever gave Emily such baskets; people gave her gold pens and leather address books. She kept the baskets on hand as gifts for cleaning ladies and secretaries. But tonight she was going to use one for herself.

She peeled off the heat-shrink wrap and sorted through the artificial grass finding bath salts, scented soap, perfumed candles. She took them into her pretty bathroom, lighting the candles on the sill beneath the leaded glass window. The water tumbling from the faucet burst the rose bath gel into mountains of bubbles, and the candles burned with scents of lavender, violets, and limes, turning the bathroom into a flowery garden. Across the wicker hamper, Emily draped her apricot satin gown and robe that she had never before worn when alone. She laid a board across the tub so she could do her nails.

An hour later, as she tightened the sash of the robe, her hair curling from the humidity of the bath, she thought about calling Jeff. She wanted to talk to him, to tell him that she had decided to quit listening to the show. But did Jeff want to hear from her? She didn't know.

What do you do when you aren't sure someone wants to hear from you?

You write them a letter.

That's what Jeff had done at the beginning of the summer, written her that nice letter from Switzerland. Letters were

gentle things, they didn't intrude with the sharp ring of a phone. That was always her solution to everything, get on the phone and start yammering away, whether the people on the other end wanted to hear from her or not. A letter didn't force itself on you. You could ignore letters if you wanted.

But Emily hadn't written a personal letter in years. She felt uncomfortable. She went back to her linen closet and found a box of blue-edged paper, another unopened gift for someone else.

Dear Jeff,

I know I don't write as well as you, but—

She stopped, crumpled the thick paper. She wasn't going to apologize. If he wanted a woman who could write a great letter, he could go find one. If he wanted a woman who cared deeply about him, who ached for him, who loved him, then he could put up with someone whose literary model was a stock offering.

Dear Jeff,

I wanted to tell you that I turned off Woody's show tonight. Spelled out like that it doesn't seem important, but it felt important at the time.

Control is important to me. I know it's too important, that I do all sorts of crazy things to be in control, but with the show I feel like I've lost control of my own past. When Leslie was so awful to Arnold tonight, I felt like I had done it, like I owed Steve an apology. Woody's changing my past and there's nothing I can do about it, but there is something I can do . . . I don't have to listen. Surely it's all right to be a high-control type with one's own memories.

I am very worried about Woody, the show's changing. I wish I could believe that there was something we could do, but I don't know what. Mail cookies to him, perhaps. My mother would approve, but I'm not sure how effective it would be.

With Labor Day so late this year, I guess we have another four weeks of summer. I'm going to stay in

Chicago, spending my time and money on the house. I'd like to put in some bulbs this fall. Maybe if I start planning now, I'll do it.

Love,
Emily

She reread the letter. It really was lame. "With Labor Day so late this year, I guess we have another four weeks of summer." That was stupid. Jeff taught school. He did not need anyone to tell him when Labor Day was.

But stupid or not, she was going to send the letter.

She was addressing the envelope when the doorbell rang. She knotted her robe more securely and went to answer it.

It was Steve.

"Steve, how nice—" And then she remembered the show, how she had looked at him like a garter belt with stretched-out elastic. She felt awkward. But she was not going to apologize. Emily Gordon had done nothing to Steve DeLoss. "Won't you come in?"

He was embarrassed too. But the quick shift of his eyes down, then away, told her why. This was not the 100 percent cotton robe she had worn when he had been living here.

She was direct. "I'm sorry. Do you want me to change?"

"No . . ." He turned red. "No, you don't need to. Actually that's very pretty."

He seemed tired, his body still, drained of the nervous energy that usually vibrated through him. Emily took his hand, sat down with him on the sofa, and waited for him to speak.

"Did you listen to the show tonight?" he asked at last.

"I turned it off."

"You didn't miss much."

The whole time he had been living here, Emily didn't think they had ever sat like this, hand in hand. It was nice, like sitting with her brother, and it occurred to her that Steve DeLoss was the only man in the world, except perhaps her brother himself, whom she could touch as a friend. Jeff was more than a friend, and the men she knew through work were less. Steve was her friend.

And she was not going to let Woody spoil that.

"Steve, what's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing."

She knew that wasn't true. "Are you sick of the show? I am."

He nodded. "I am, I really am. Week after week, it's Arnold the Dweeb, Arnold the Doofus—I mean, I *know* I was that way, but I am getting awfully sick of being reminded."

Emily could understand that. "But more and more the show doesn't have all that much to do with us." Two hours ago she could not have said that. "Like tonight, Jeff didn't plagiarize a paper, I'm sure of it. And you never asked me out, and if you had, I hope I would have been nicer about it."

Steve pulled his hand away. "But you still would have turned me down."

Emily wasn't sure what to say . . . because she probably would have. But how could she know? "Steve, this is nuts, to sit around speculating what I would have done if Jeff and I had broken up. It doesn't matter, none of it happened."

"Woody was not completely off base tonight," Steve said.

Emily drew back, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"If there ever was a girl I thought about in high school, it was you."

"Oh, Steve . . ." Now she really did not know what to say. That was the problem with the show; reliving the past like this, she couldn't see where it got them. "You didn't know me."

"I know that." His calm tone was reassuring; whatever he had felt in high school had not lasted. "And it probably had more to do with your being Jeff's girl, with my wanting to be him."

"You wanted to be like Jeff?"

"Who didn't? Except the guys who wanted to be like Bobby. I mean, Jeff was smart, he was sure of himself . . . he was good at everything."

Emily sighed. This all seemed so pathetic. "And don't you understand that Jeff would have sold his soul to be like you?"

Steve jerked. "Like me? Jeff wanted to be like me?"

Emily nodded. "Yes, he was good at everything, but he wanted to be great at *one* thing—like you were. That's why

he married the woman that he did." Emily was surprising herself; she'd had no idea she understood these things. Maybe there was some value to sorting through the past. "Britta had one incredible talent, and Jeff envied her for it."

It was still a problem for him. Being good at everything had made it hard for him to find direction. He could do any number of things, many more than she or Steve or Woody could, but in the back of his mind, he must always be thinking that someone else could do each one of them better than he could.

This was now all so clear to Emily that she didn't need to talk about it. She certainly hadn't intended to let the conversation dwell on Jeff even though he was constantly in her thoughts. That wasn't fair to Steve. He had come here with needs of his own. She might not be a good Cherokee yet, but she knew that much.

"You didn't start listening to the show regularly until you came up here, did you?" she asked him.

He shook his head.

"Then you might have started at exactly the wrong time. I have tapes of the old shows. If I gave them to you, would you listen to them?"

"But . . . I just said . . ."

"I know, but it was different in the early days. Woody liked Arnold, he admired him, he respected him. You need to hear it. Would you listen to them?"

Steve shrugged. "I suppose."

She sent him down to the basement for a box, then went into the study, kneeling down to get out all the old tapes. There was an astonishing number of them, neatly stacked, each cassette carefully labeled: *May 3, tape #2.* For most of the shows she had the full four hours, although a few times she had not been home to put in a fresh tape and then only had the first ninety minutes. The collection was nearly complete. She could make a fortune bootlegging them.

Steve came in with the box and started to help her pack the tapes, careful to keep them in order.

"You can—" *fast-forward over the songs,* she had been about to say. Steve could figure out how to listen to a tape; he didn't need her advice. They worked silently, their hands brushing as she handed him the tapes. When they finished,

he closed the box, interlacing the four sections of the top more deftly than Emily had ever seen anyone do.

Emily expected him to pick up the box, but he left it on the desk, staring down at it. In a moment, he pulled off his glasses, holding them up to the light, peering through them as if looking for smudges. He wasn't looking at her. "The scars on your arms have healed well, haven't they?"

Her apricot gown had long sleeves; he must have noticed earlier. "Yes, they have."

"And your face . . . you weren't cut on your face."

He had to have known that for years. "No."

He put his glasses back on, carefully hooking the wire frames behind each ear. "That's good because it would have been my—" He stopped.

It would have been his what? His fault?

No, that was crazy. He had been inside his house just like Woody had been inside Mr. Crockett's house. Why was everyone trying to turn this into some big mystery?

Maybe because it was.

A direct question would never work. "You know," she said mildly, "it's funny, but what bothers Jeff about Woody's show is not what he says, but what he doesn't say. Like the accident, he doesn't understand why Woody doesn't do the accident."

Steve had been reaching for the box of tapes, but when she mentioned the accident, he straightened, looking at her intently, his eyes owlish behind the thick glasses.

"Do you know for sure that Woody was at Mr. Crockett's?" he asked. "You don't think there was any chance that he had already left, that he was on the road, that he knew what really happened?"

Emily shook her head. "As far as I know, he was still with Mr. Crockett. And what's there to know? The road was wet, Bobby spun out on that curve near your house and ran into a tree."

"Your dad said there was another car."

"He didn't know, he was guessing, assuming that—" She stopped. Steve was pale. She spoke carefully. "Was there another car?"

He nodded.

It took Emily a moment to understand. "Was it—"

"Yes, yes." Sixteen years of silence welled up and burst out in an impatient cry. "I was the other car. *I* caused the accident."

Emily stared at him. "But you were inside." No, apparently he wasn't. She sank down onto the upholstered chair.

It was the Sunday before Senior Week, the week of the Senior Assembly, the student-faculty Olympics, and the prom . . .

Steve knelt at her feet, taking her hand, his voice urgent as he finally told his side of the story.

The radio station was promising a week of clear skies and light winds, but tonight rain clouds had darkened the evening skies . . . Bobby had his father's Impala. Emily and Jeff darted through the rain to the car.

"I'd been in Peoria. I played with a string quartet there, and I was driving home in the rain. I was ten, maybe twenty yards beyond Mr. Crockett's place when I saw a pair of headlights switch on."

Bobby's headlights cut a short swath through the darkness. Ahead of his car was a pair of faint red taillights, steadily growing closer as Bobby accelerated.

"The lights turned out of Mr. Crockett's place and whoever was behind the wheel was driving crazy, going so fast that he caught up with me about a half mile before the bend, and he wanted to pass, he was tailgating me, flashing his brights."

It was a long sweeping curve, but the road was narrow, and on a night like this the shoulders were mud.

"I should have slowed down to let him by, that's how I always drive. If someone's acting crazy, just keep out of the way. I should have pulled over, but I didn't."

The Impala shot toward the arc.

"And I kept thinking about the pothole at the top of the curve, how the county still hadn't fixed it, how you had to swing wide. Everybody did. I kept thinking how it would serve that car right if it tried to pass me as I was at the pothole."

The tires lost traction, the car spun, whirling off the road . . .

"That's just what he did, just before that old elm, he started to pass, and there was that awful sound and then the

silence. It was so quiet—that's what I remember, how quiet it was."

. . . spinning again, then crunching head-on into an elm. Emily crashed through the windshield. . . . Jeff's shoulder hit the horn . . .

Emily pressed her fists against her eyes, trying to stop the whirl of memories and voices. She took a breath. "Did you swing wide?"

That would have forced Bobby off the road.

"I don't know." Steve covered his face with his hands. "I don't know."

It would have been a slight move of the steering wheel, then an automatic correction. Yes, Emily could believe that he did not know.

"I've been through it again and again," he said, "trying to persuade myself that driving is instinctive and no one would turn toward a passing car . . . I don't know. But I do know that I thought about it. I imagined it. I knew there were students in the car. Nobody else drives like that, and somehow that car became a symbol of everything that I hadn't been a part of, all the parties, the games, the dances, and I—"

Emily could not bear to listen. She interrupted. "Maybe you didn't swerve."

"It almost doesn't matter, it was still my fault. I should have let him pass, and then I should have acted more quickly. That's why you almost bled to death. That's why you had to have all that blood because I didn't do anything. Maybe I could have pulled you out of the car, stopped the bleeding somehow. But instead I was so stunned, I felt so responsible, and the silence, I just felt paralyzed by the silence. I couldn't think what to do. It was almost automatic, turning in the driveway, and I looked back at the car, I couldn't go near it, I had to go in the house and call the operator. I couldn't go near it myself. And for the longest time, no one ever asked me if I'd seen the accident, and by then it was easy to say no."

Emily felt sick. She didn't want to hear this. She thought she had dealt with the accident, had accepted the scars on her body. She didn't want these questions to come up again.

But Steve needed to talk, and he went on and on, sixteen

years' worth of thoughts pouring from him. Emily forced herself to listen, she tried to see the issues clearly. If he hadn't swerved at the pothole, everything he had been doing was legal. He would have been in his lane, driving at a prudent speed. No law said he should pull over onto the muddy shoulder so that some speeding idiot could pass him. The law didn't require it, but that's what most people did.

"Can you forgive me?" he asked at last.

"I never blamed you," she protested, wishing she could keep out of it, but knowing that she couldn't. "I don't know how I would have felt if I had known this then, but now . . . I don't know, it was so long ago."

"It still matters to me. I wish I knew whether or not I forced him off the road."

Emily could understand that. She would rather suffer the anguish of guilt than the agony of ignorance. "I suppose you're going to have to accept the fact that you never will know. What does LeeAnn say?"

Emily imagined that LeeAnn, or perhaps LeeAnn's Cherokee grandfather, would have a lot better advice for Steve than she would.

Steve flushed. "I haven't told her."

"Don't you think you should?" LeeAnn was the one who loved him, not Emily.

But perhaps he was like Emily, finding a friendship less complicated, less threatening than love. Perhaps he too needed a rehearsal.

"I don't know . . ." He picked up the box of Woody's tapes. "I'll get these right back to you."

"Don't worry about it," Emily murmured, not caring. "Take your time."

She followed him to the door. After she shut it behind him, she went to the kitchen phone and dialed LeeAnn's number.

"I'm sorry it's so late," she said when LeeAnn answered. "I hope I didn't wake you?"

"Oh, no. I've been trying to call Steve, but he's not home."

"He was here. He just left."

"Thank God." LeeAnn sounded relieved. "I'm glad he

wasn't listening to the show alone. How did he react to the science class bit?"

Emily had almost forgotten that it was Sunday night. She had to explain, how she had been alone, how she had turned the show off. "What happened in science class?"

"Arnold got an erection and all the girls noticed—it was incredibly funny . . . or at least it would have been if I hadn't been thinking about how miserable he would be hearing it, whether it happened or not."

"I don't imagine it did. I never heard about it." What happened or didn't happen on Woody's show didn't seem so important anymore. "LeeAnn, is there any chance you could come to Chicago? Steve needs you."

"Steve always needs someone."

LeeAnn's voice was suddenly cold. Yet when Emily had called her just yesterday, needing sympathy and advice for herself, LeeAnn had been so warm and forthcoming. Why was she so available to a friend—and a rather new friend—and so unwilling to accept responsibility for her lover?

"No, LeeAnn, he needs *you.*"

LeeAnn didn't say anything, and Emily understood the struggle. LeeAnn was busy; she had a new supervisory position. Now was not the time to be flitting off to Chicago. To what extent was a woman to rearrange her schedule, her plans, because some man had decided his life was falling apart? What was the balance between unnecessary self-sacrifice and spinsterish rigidity? Emily didn't know the answer to that either.

When LeeAnn finally spoke, her voice was quieter than Emily had ever heard. "All right. I'll come. I'll be there Friday."

fifteen

"Who's your letter from?"

A screen door banged, and Jeff looked up. His neighbor Jeannie came out onto the concrete porch that ran between their two doors. As hot as it was, they both had their windows and doors open. Jeannie didn't like what the window air conditioners did to her electric bill, and Jeff didn't like how claustrophobic an already small place seemed with everything shut up.

He looked down at the blue-edged note paper. "It's from a woman. An old girlfriend."

"Miss Gordon Construction?" Jeannie scooped her hair off her neck. "What does she have to say? Does she want to start things up again?"

Last April his students had asked if that lady who had come into class was a friend of his. This too was another hard question to answer. "I'm not really sure."

Jeannie shrugged. In her day-to-day struggle to raise three kids on a waitress's tips, she didn't have time for psychological complexities. Jeff thought that if she and Emily could get beyond the difference in class, education, and achievement, they might find that they had a lot in common. Maybe that's why he liked living next door to Jeannie; she was—if this made any sense—a pink-collar version of Emily.

He cast around for something to say, then remembered a line in Emily's letter. Labor Day was late this year. "So what are your kids going to do with three more weeks of summer?"

Jeannie groaned. "Don't ask . . . I certainly don't plan to. You teachers have to be the only adults in the world happy about it, but, no, you always look forward to going back to work, don't you?" Jeannie found that a very strange notion.

"Usually." Jeff folded Emily's letter and used its edge to beat a little tattoo along the porch railing. If he dropped it, it would land in the petunias, a white rectangle half-hidden in the downy foliage and scarlet and purple flowers.

Usually he did look forward to school starting up again. But this year was different. He was suddenly more aware of all that was wrong, the time-wasting committees and the silly, well-meaning regulations. It was getting harder and harder to wall off his own classroom from the mediocrity that swirled through the public school system. Where on earth had he found the energy to fight so hard in other years?

Since coming back from the city on Saturday, a deep lethargy had settled over him. It was not like anything he had ever felt before. *I have nothing to live for . . . seems like nothing's going to come my way, just sitting on the dock of the bay, wasting time.* Even answering Emily's letter seemed like too much work.

"You want a beer?" Jeannie asked.

It was two in the afternoon. "Sure."

Jeff was not a stupid man. He knew that people might call his lethargy depression. But there was a certain peace about it. *Two thousand miles I've roamed, just to make this dock my home.* That wasn't all bad.

* * *

Friday morning Emily came out of the train station just as the pedestrian light at Madison was changing to red. At the back of the crowd of people hurrying to the opposite curb, she saw another T-shirt, this time a purple one with yellow letters: "Written-in-Stone High" it said across the back. She almost started across the street, wanting to see what was written on the front, but the oncoming traffic forced her back, and she had to remind herself that she no longer cared.

Later that morning on her way back to her office from the ladies' room, she heard Liz call to her. She stopped in the middle of the corridor, letting martyrdom's delicious warmth surge through her. What would it be this time? What trip couldn't Liz go on? What meeting couldn't she take? What was going to happen to spoil the weekend with Steve and LeeAnn?

But when she stepped into Liz's office, there was a woman sitting in the chair opposite Liz's desk. About Emily's age, casually dressed with a mop of short, curly hair, she was balancing a coffee cup on a steno notebook, but she was no stenographer, Emily could tell that.

Liz introduced her. "Emily, this is Christine Zimmer, a writer from the *Tribune*. She's doing a profile on Bob Hutchinson." Liz turned back to the reporter. "Emily went to high school with Bob."

Oh, great. This was exactly what she needed this morning.

Christine Zimmer's polite greeting gave way to a look of quick interest. "Nancy Hanks High?" she asked, and when Emily nodded, went on. "I was just there last week, talking to the football coach about him. If you have a minute, I've got a couple of questions that no one there seemed to be able to answer."

Emily tried to smile. She could imagine what those questions would be. *Everyone says Bobby was such a safe driver . . . what made him lose control of the car? . . . there's something here that doesn't make sense . . .*

And what would she say? Tell the world that Steve might have swerved? That he didn't know, but in any event, he hadn't slowed down? It would make a good story, and it was not one that Emily would ever tell, not even to Jeff—if she ever spoke to Jeff again, that is—and certainly not to a *Chicago Tribune* reporter.

But what could she do? Not cooperate when the *Trib* was running a profile on a client? "Of course. Have Liz bring you down to my office when you're done here."

"Oh, we're done." Christine Zimmer drained her coffee cup and stood up.

In her office, Emily motioned the writer into a chair and sat down behind her desk. She folded her arms, running her

fingertips over her scars. How did Christine know that she had been in the car? Had Bobby told her?

Christine flipped open her notebook. "This is completely irrelevant to the story, and I ought not to be wasting your time—"

Yes. What happened that night isn't relevant. The effects, yes, that's what you're writing about, but not that night itself.

"—but have you ever heard of the Cal Kirkland show?"

Emily blinked. "The Cal Kirkland show? Yes, yes, of course."

"When I was back at your school—I don't think I'm off base here—I was struck by how exactly it corresponded to the high school he talks about. I'm a big fan of the show, and whenever I listen, I picture it all happening in my high school—I graduated the same year you and Bob did—but there're differences between Written in Stone and my school. Our big glass display case was next to the office not across from it, we had a third story in the old part of the building, that sort of thing."

Emily did not know what to say. "You listen carefully."

"I'm a reporter, that's my job. And since I've gotten home, I've picked up some bootleg tapes. Except for that new swimming pool addition, everything about the two schools is precisely the same. It's uncanny."

"A high school is a high school." That was a feeble reply, Emily knew.

"But how many schools have exactly six trophy cases outside the gym? How many schools' mascot seals are a gift of the Class of '52?"

Christine was right. What irony. For all the psychological material, the insights that were the heart of the show, it was the physical details—the shape of the cafeteria, the color of the shelves in the library, things that Woody had probably never thought about and had flown from him, unplanned—that would be what would expose him, expose all of them.

Then Christine Zimmer said it. "So what I'm wondering is if Cal Kirkland—I know that that's a pseudonym—was a student at Nancy Hanks High. I'm really interested in doing a story on it. I asked Bob Hutchinson but he'd never heard of the show."

Emily took a breath and lied. "I do listen to the show occasionally, but I have no idea who the deejay is."

"The voice isn't at all familiar?"

"Voices on the radio all sound the same, and high school was a long time ago. I don't even know that I would recognize my old boyfriend's voice anymore."

"That's true." Christine stood up. "And I am wasting your time . . . but when I get done with this profile, I'm going to pitch the story to my editor. Can I call you then?"

"I don't think it will do you any good."

"Surely there weren't that many people in your school with this kind of talent. The creativity, the fluency that's behind the show, that's not something everyone has. It would have to be easy to come up with a short list."

What could Emily say? "I really don't have any ideas."

* * *

For the rest of the day, Emily thought of nothing else but what Christine Zimmer might write. She thought about it while she talked to clients, while she phoned brokers, while she sat on the train going home. Never before had she been so glad to see Steve's car in her driveway.

She hugged LeeAnn, and then suddenly turned and hugged Steve too. "I've missed you," she said.

He went red. "I was just here Sunday night."

"I know." What did it matter if he'd swerved or not? That was a long time ago, he had suffered plenty, and he was her friend. "But that's not the same as having you here when I get home. That's when I need someone to talk to."

She sat down on one of her garnet-covered wing chairs and leaned her head against the high back, letting the peace of her own house, the cool air, surround her. She closed her eyes until she heard a rustle, then a soft click on the marble-topped end table. Steve had brought her a glass of wine.

What if she still lived in the apartment? What if she didn't have these friends here? She would be facing this alone.

She told them what had happened.

"How will you feel if this all gets out?" LeeAnn asked when she was finished.

"Oh, that's simple." It was easier to joke now that she was

home. "I'll hang myself. The only question is whether I'll do it in the privacy of my own home or off the Picasso. I mean, how would you feel if all the people you supervise now found out every embarrassing thing you'd done in high school?"

"I'd think hanging was too slow," LeeAnn answered. "But what about you, Steve? How would you feel?"

He shrugged. "It depends on what comes out. If it was just what's gone on so far, I suppose I could live with it. But I've got a different kind of career than either of you. It's not like anyone would be surprised to learn that I was the nerdball of the twentieth century. Musicians are supposed to be."

"What does Jeff think?" LeeAnn asked. "Did you call him?"

Emily shook her head. She was not going to put any pressure on Jeff.

The other two waited to see if she was going to say more. When she didn't, Steve stood up. "The kitchen calls me. Can I get anyone anything before I disappear?"

He excelled himself on dinner. He had gotten a key from Emily and had come to her house long before he had had to go to the airport to pick up LeeAnn. He had made a marinade for some fresh salmon; he had trimmed baby vegetables and made a walnut vinaigrette; he had set the dining room table with Emily's silver and china.

"I don't believe this," LeeAnn whispered to Emily after he had gone into the kitchen to get dessert. "Has this been going on all summer?"

"Not on this scale. He's trying to impress you."

"*He's* trying to impress *me?* That sure is a new trick."

"Is it working?"

"This part is."

Sharing a weekend with two lovers had never been Emily's idea of fun. Before Liz had married Mason, she had frequently invited Emily to go skiing, apple picking, or leaf watching with the two of them. Emily had always refused. The last thing she wanted to do was spend an afternoon politely reading a magazine while giggles and grunts filtered through a bedroom wall.

But Steve and LeeAnn behaved themselves. They never disappeared into the guest room, they never exchanged

tender glances or private jokes that excluded Emily. In fact, Steve spent so much time in the kitchen, trying to turn himself into Emily's mother, that Emily found she and LeeAnn had plenty of time to get to know each other better.

She asked LeeAnn more about the Cherokees, and LeeAnn told her of classrooms where the white children sat in the front and did all the talking, and the Indian children sat silently around the edges. "Whenever the teacher would have a team spelling bee, the Cherokee kids would all kill themselves to do well. A good Cherokee competes for the glory of the team, the tribe. But if it was an individual spell-down, each student out for himself, the Indian children didn't try."

Emily noticed LeeAnn talking about "the Cherokee." She never said "us" or "we." Nothing she was saying seemed to apply to herself. She called attention to herself; her manner, her dress commanded other people to notice. When she walked into a room, people looked. When she spoke, they listened. You didn't get that way by being a good team player. The restraint, the quiet dignity that LeeAnn described as part of her Cherokee heritage were swallowed by her vibrant charm.

She laughed almost self-consciously when Emily mentioned this. "So you noticed. In high school, I figured out that the goodies went to the individual winners so I decided to turn myself into a white person. Until I got into management this summer, I would have said that my attitude toward my background wasn't even ambivalent. But now I can see that it has its uses. Too bad my grandfather isn't still alive—business schools could use him."

"What about your parents?" Emily asked.

"They were semiassimilated, with too many kids and a dream of getting on the government payroll."

"You have brothers and sisters?"

"Do I have brothers and sisters! Six of them—the youngest born when I was fourteen. That's why I'm never having children. I've raised all the kids I'm going to. I guess it's what they call the oldest daughter syndrome."

"I'm the oldest," Emily said. "And Kelly's thirteen years younger than me."

"Then I don't have to tell you."

Emily thought. Yes, she had baby-sat for Kelly. She had changed diapers, she had fed her, read to her, but raised her? No.

"My parents were careful," she said to LeeAnn. "I probably haven't appreciated it before, but I've always been Kelly's sister, not her mother. And anyway, I can't say that I don't want children."

"Oh?" LeeAnn was surprised. "I thought this house was a big 'Screw You' statement, telling the men of the world that you didn't need them."

"It was a statement of independence, yes, but I didn't intend it to be that hostile. At any rate, even if I don't seem to be making much progress toward having kids, it is something that I always assumed I would do someday."

"Do you want them badly enough to do it by yourself or adopt as a single parent?" LeeAnn asked.

Emily couldn't answer that. But it was a good question. If she had given up on Mr. Right signing a mortgage for her, maybe she should give up on him being a dad too.

It was a difficult choice, the exhausting, unending problems of being a single parent weighed against a child's bright eyes. Her life would be so much more difficult than Liz's or Stuart's, but how could she say she never wanted a child? And how could she think about it when her relationship with Jeff was so confused?

But her relationship with Jeff might always be confused.

"I'm not going to think about it until next June," she announced, suddenly decisive, as sure as she had been about her decision not to date this summer. "I'm going to give myself a year in the house. I'll be thirty-five then, and that's when I'll start trying to figure out the children issue. Then I'll make some kind of decision. I don't want to be fifty and still saying I don't know whether or not I want children." She stood up. "Now let's go see what Steve is planning on feeding us."

Steve had made a wonderful raspberry crunch. Emily was trying to decide whether to have a second helping when she noticed the time. It was seven. She stood up from the table and excused herself. "I'm not listening to Woody's show anymore, but you two go ahead."

So Steve and LeeAnn went into the study. Emily did the

dishes, discovering that Steve had added a fair number of rather exotic utensils to her working-girl's collection of wooden spoons and rubber spatulas, and she didn't know where he kept them. She left them out on the drainboard for him to put away. Then she went upstairs to read.

Around nine, she heard Steve at the foot of the stairs. "Emily, LeeAnn thinks you ought to come down. Woody's about to do the accident."

Emily dropped her magazine and scrambled out of bed. "What's he saying?"

Steve and LeeAnn were both at the foot of the stairs, looking concerned. "He hasn't done it yet."

Emily could hear some music. "What's happened so far?"

"It's the day of the senior class picnic," LeeAnn answered. "There's been a lot of drinking so the chaperones broke it up. The basketball crowd all left early, and Lance has just asked Skip for a ride home."

Lance was Bobby's character. "But that's not right. Bobby was driving, not Jeff. And we didn't have a senior class picnic. This can't be the accident."

"Listen to the song," Steve said.

Emily listened. It was "Tell Laura I Love Her," your basic crash-and-burn, teen-death song. "Oh, wonderful."

"And before this," he went on, "was 'Leader of the Pack.'"

So Woody was going to do the accident. But why have Skip drive?

"By the way," LeeAnn added as they all moved into the study, "you and Skip made up. You did it when people started drinking too much."

Emily dropped into the upholstered chair. "Good for us."

Skip says sure, of course, Lance can ride home with him. Then he slaps his forehead. "I forgot, I came out with C.J., but I'm sure there's room for you. He has his dad's Impala."

"Wait a minute." Emily sat up, pushing her hair off her face. "Now Woody's driving? That doesn't make sense. He wasn't there."

"But the car was an Impala," Steve said.

Now what Skip and Leslie and Lance don't know is that C.J. was one of those guys sneaking off into the trees, having some beers. In fact, he was the one who brought most of the beer. And he's feeling pretty good by now, pretty good indeed, driving back into town, having ruined the senior class picnic—that's not something a person does every day. So they're all tooling back into town, coming up the long hill, and there's this tractor pulling a combine.

Well now, there's no way C.J.'s going to wait behind this tractor all the way up the long hill. So he pulls out, guns the Impala, and he's flying around the combine when just over the hill comes Reverend Tobin in his green Plymouth.

So Woody didn't know how the accident happened. Emily was careful not to look at Steve.

Now Reverend Tobin, he's sober, he's always sober, so he pulls that green Plymouth off to the right. It bounces off the shoulder and comes to rest in the ditch at the side of the road. And everything would have been okay, but C.J. pulls to the right too, crashes into that combine, which sends his car spinning, rolling.

C.J., he's thrown clear and Skip is too. Leslie, she takes a different route out of the car, through the windshield, and Lance . . . well, Lance . . . it's the biggest cliché in the world, isn't it, the promising young athlete who can't walk anymore.

Emily got up. She didn't care what the others wanted. She was turning off the radio. The first notes of the next song had already started when she got to the receiver. "Turn it off," Steve said, "turn it off now."

Emily did. The silence sounded wonderful.

They all stared at each other.

"I don't understand," LeeAnn said. "Why was C.J. driving? Why was it his fault? Does Woody have something to feel guilty about?"

"I have no idea," Emily answered.

Clearly there was even more to the accident, more that they didn't understand. Otherwise Woody would not have had himself drive the car.

LeeAnn turned to Steve. "You recognized the song he played afterward. What was it?"

He didn't want to answer, that was clear. "'Born to Run.'"

* * *

Jeff pushed open the screen. The night was hot and still; there hadn't been any wind since midmorning. The black flies were going to be something awful tomorrow.

A green Plymouth and a combine? That wasn't what had happened. Nor had Woody been driving. He had been back at Crockett's house, safe and sound.

It was more than Jeff could think about.

He heard a noise behind him, and a bright light tumbled down over the yard, sliced in half by his shadow. Jeannie had switched on the porch light. Her shadow came over to join his.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "You've seemed tired the last couple days. Are you getting sick or something?"

Or something. "Maybe it's the start of a summer cold." But he knew that wasn't true. This tiredness wasn't physical.

How the hell was he going to teach this fall? The kids expected so much these days; you had to be a cross between Socrates and MTV. They responded to you and your enthusiasm long before they knew whether they cared about the subject. How was he going to get himself cranked up again for comma placement? What new tricks were there to persuade a roomful of sixteen-year-olds that *The Scarlet Letter* had something to do with them?

It would be nice to quit, find some job where everyone left you alone, where it didn't matter what you wore to the liquor store, who you slept with on Saturday night.

Jeannie was standing close to him. He put his arm around her. He didn't do that often. She was taller than Emily, less delicately built.

"The light's drawing the bugs," she said.

So it was. Swarms of little night-flying summer insects were hovering around the porch light. Occasionally one would fry itself against the bulb with a little hiss.

Jeff knew what his next line was supposed to be. *So let's go*

in. Her two younger kids were asleep. The older one was still out and wouldn't think to check on Mom when he came home. She was free to come next door.

He looked down at her. How on earth had he ever thought she was anything like Emily?

He let go of her. "We really ought to put a bug light in that fixture," he said.

* * *

The ring of the phone startled Emily from her sleep. She shook her head sharply, ran her hands over her face, trying to wake up, then answered.

"Ms. Gordon, this is Christine Zimmer. I'd like to ask you a few questions if I may."

Emily squinted at the clock. It was nearly eight. What had happened to her alarm?

"Emily, are you there? Liz said I should try you at home."

What was Liz doing giving out her home number?

And then she was suddenly, sickeningly awake. Christine Zimmer would have heard the show last night, have heard Lance being injured in exactly the way Bobby had been. Before she had had suspicions; now she must be sure. The parallel couldn't be a coincidence.

"Did you hear the Cal Kirkland show last night?"

Emily didn't answer.

"Do you have anything to say about it?"

"No."

"When I was in your office on Friday, I couldn't help noticing that you have scars on your arms."

"That's correct."

"And that your ears aren't pierced evenly. Ms. Gordon, are you Leslie?"

Emily closed her eyes. She knew what she should say. *I'm sorry, but I don't have a comment on that,* or *Surely that's too speculative for me to answer,* or even *No, absolutely not, no way.* She dealt with the media all the time; she knew how to lie, she knew how to evade. But she couldn't bring herself to, she couldn't face it. She hung up.

In a moment the phone started to ring again. She hurried to the stairs, calling out to Steve and LeeAnn not to answer

it, to let it ring. "It's that reporter. The show last night . . . it told her everything."

LeeAnn asked a few calm questions, trying to minimize what had happened.

"No, she still doesn't know Woody's name," Emily answered. "But now she's sure she has a story so she won't stop until she gets it. And she also knows that the story includes lots of juicy autobiographical material."

LeeAnn grimaced. There was no way to minimize that.

Steve spoke. "I think we need to call Jeff. She'll probably go to Nancy Hanks. Mention your name, and people are going to mention his. Don't you think it's only fair to warn him that she's coming?" Then he grew a little awkward. "If it's a problem, I can call."

What a nice man Steve was. Emily couldn't believe that he understood the troubles she was having with Jeff, but he knew there were problems and he wanted to make things easier for her.

"Thank you," she said, "but no, I can call him." She moved over to the kitchen phone, picked it up, and dialed.

Jeff answered, and suddenly as shy as Steve, Emily faltered, having difficulty with her words. When she finished, Jeff was quiet for a moment, then spoke.

"I appreciate your concern, but I imagine I can handle a reporter."

Emily shut her eyes. What a dolt she was. Of course he could handle a reporter. He had been one. He knew all the tricks. He didn't need to be warned.

"Was there anything else? I'm supposed to meet your sister at the track in ten minutes, and I don't want to keep her waiting."

"No, no, that was it."

She hung up, even unhappier than before she had called. What was the big deal about meeting Kelly? They were running laps. It wasn't like she couldn't start without him. *Yes, there was something else. I wanted to tell you how frightened I am. I wanted to tell you what this will mean to me. I need you, Jeff. I need you here.*

* * *

Kelly was already at the track, her hands gripping the fence as she stretched out her calves. She looked underneath her arm at him. "I hear your times are going up."

"I know that. I'm not trying very hard."

"Shame, shame." She straightened, rolled her shoulders, and broke into an easy lope. She was going for distance, not speed, today.

He knew he had been slowing down. That's why he had called, wanting to train with her for a few days. She would get him working hard again. That was one thing about the Gordon women; nothing like them for beating a man back into shape.

So why didn't he call Emily? Let her beat him back into emotional health. He could try to explain what was going on; she would do her best to help, he knew that. But he couldn't possibly explain, and Emily's best would not be very good. She was not the sort of person who understood why some days other folks had trouble getting one foot in front of the other.

He finished his stretches and caught up with Kelly as she rounded the track. He let her set the pace and for the moment, concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other.

About halfway around the track, she spoke. "You've gone back to breathing on your right foot."

That was true. He hadn't noticed. On the advice of one of her track coaches, they had both adopted a three-two breathing pattern. It had been hard to get used to, but after a week or so, they had both liked it. Unthinkingly he had slipped back into the old way.

For the next two laps he forced himself to alternate between breathing on a right footstep and a left. Then it became automatic, and for the first time since he had opened that box of Emily's notes, running started to feel good again. And as he gave his body over to the rhythm, his mind went blank.

And then in the hush of physical exertion, one thought came to him, an irrational notion, which he could not defend, but whose truth he seemed unable to deny—that Woody was trying to say something to him, trying to get him

to do something. Emily could turn off the show, but he couldn't. There was a message in it for him, a plea.

On the way home from the track, he stopped at the drugstore and bought a pack of gum.

* * *

That evening Emily's parents called. Christine Zimmer was sitting in their living room. Emily shut her eyes, not wanting to hear this.

"She's asking all kinds of questions about your friend, David Woodman," Glenda said.

So Christine was there; she knew Woody's name, she had her story. "What did you tell her?" Emily asked.

"That he was a very nice boy. She keeps asking what he's doing now, but of course, we don't know. She says something about a radio show. Then she started asking about you, who your other friends were. That's when we called."

"Can you tell us what this is all about?" Jim asked.

Emily knew that he would understand if she said no. But she told them about the radio show. "And the characters and all," she finished, "well, they are us, Steve and Jeff and me."

Her mother was excited. "Why didn't you tell us? We would have listened."

"Actually it was a little embarrassing."

"It couldn't be that bad." Glenda could tell that she was upset. "Everyone has their little adolescent embarrassments."

Yes, but not everyone was a single woman working in the investment community, not everyone was trying to persuade professional bowlers and barely literate boxers that a *girl* could negotiate their contracts, manage their money better than they could.

* * *

All week Emily went about her business, meeting with clients, evaluating bond rates, investing in new restaurants, absorbed, concentrating—and then a thought would jolt through, shattering, freezing her into stillness. *It's about to happen. Something's about to happen.*

She was almost eager for it to happen, even knowing that

her life would be worse for it, but at least she could deal with it. She could make a list, she could be doing something; anything had to be better than this waiting.

Christine Zimmer called again Thursday evening. LeeAnn took the call. "This is your last chance for a comment," she reported. "Her article appears Sunday morning."

"How much does she know?"

"It sounds like a lot."

Saturday night Emily kept waking. She would turn, checking the green numbers on her clock: 1:42, 2:37, 3:31. At 4:46 she got up, put on her robe, went downstairs softly, hoping not to wake Steve and LeeAnn. They were already up.

They sat in the kitchen drinking coffee, taking turns getting up to look through the living room window, glancing up and down the street for the paperboy. When he finally appeared, Emily went down to the curb and took the paper from him. LeeAnn and Steve came down from the front porch, crowding around to read over her shoulder. She fumbled through the paper, letting the front page and the sports slip to the ground as she found the *Tempo* section.

Cal Kirkland, Mystery D.J, read the headline, "by *Chicago Tribune* staff writer Christine Zimmer."

From a radio station in Little Rock, Arkansas, comes the . . .

The letters blurred and Emily's eye was drawn to her own picture, part of a sidebar entitled *Where They Are Now.* There were pictures of her, Jeff, Steve, Bobby, Miss Rowart, Mr. Huddleston, all with captions and paragraphs. *Thought to be the model for Leslie, Cal Kirkland's central female character, Emily Gordon, 34, is associated with Hemphill Associates, a sports management organization. A graduate of the University of Chicago, Gordon, who refused to be interviewed for this article, lives in the Chicago area.*

"That's a nice picture of you," LeeAnn said mildly.

Thought to be the model for Leslie . . . Emily sank down onto the front steps.

It was all there—everything about Leslie, the fights over hem lengths, the blood on the sleeve of her sweater, the Kleenex in her bra, the episode at the lake house.

Emily—Leslie—felt sick.

LeeAnn took the paper from her.

Thought to be . . . So everyone was going to know. Everyone.

She stood up. "I'm going to call Jeff." This time it was simple, it was clear. She had to talk to Jeff.

Still reading, LeeAnn lifted her hand. "Wait a minute. Let me finish this."

Emily grew impatient. "Come on. I want to call Jeff. He should know."

LeeAnn looked up. "Are you sure he doesn't already know?"

"What do you mean?"

"Look, it says you and Steve refused comment, and that Bob Hutchinson and one of your teachers were completely surprised, that neither of them had ever heard of the show, but it doesn't say anything about talking to Jeff."

"That's silly. She must have talked to Jeff, she had to have. She couldn't have been in Nancy Hanks and not have called him."

"Maybe she did," LeeAnn said slowly. "Maybe he was the source. Maybe he told her all this."

"Jeff?" Emily stared at her. "You can't be serious. Jeff would never do that."

"Wouldn't he?"

"No, of course not. He was the one who said that we shouldn't get in touch with Woody, that knowing about us would—oh, God, I don't remember what he said, but anyway, he wouldn't—" Emily stopped. "You don't really think he did it?"

"I'm afraid so."

"But why would he do that?" Steve asked. "It makes no sense."

LeeAnn stood up. "Let's go inside. There's no reason for us to discuss this in the front yard in our pajamas. Let's get dressed, and then talk about it."

Emily went up to her room, turning on the jets of her shower, stepping out of her summer robe, letting the hot water sear red on her back.

Jeff had sworn that he would never be faithless, that he would never betray her. What did he call this? Why hadn't he gone out and slept with someone else? That would have

hurt a lot less. Didn't he know what this was going to do to her? How awful it was going to make things for her?

So he was on vacation from real life with this temporary job of his. Well, the rest of them weren't. *This is my life, Jeff. What's happening today is it; it doesn't start when I get married, when I have children. I'm not rehearsing for anything, I'm not waiting for anything. This is it.*

And he might have ruined it for her. It was bad, awful, that this had come out, but as bad as that was, it was worse that he had been the one to do it.

He'd sure been wrong about one thing. Here it was, two weeks from Labor Day, and she did hate him.

All day her phone rang. Stuart, Crispin, her clients, her friends. They were laughing, finding it exciting, titillating.

"Did you know?" they would ask.

"I suspected."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

It was none of your business. "Oh, it didn't seem important."

Each call was lacerating, mortifying.

At seven, LeeAnn switched on the radio. They gathered around it, like people in a World War II home-front photograph, tense, having no idea what they would hear.

"Are you sure he's seen the article?" Steve asked. "It only came out this morning, and Little Rock's a long way away."

"He's seen it," Emily answered. "That writer was calling his radio station just like she was calling us. She probably called them Friday, telling them it would be out today. I'm sure their publicist had it by nine this morning."

"Do you think it will make a difference to him?" LeeAnn asked.

"Jeff said it would." Emily now remembered what he had said. "He said hearing from us might interfere with Woody's thinking, make it harder for him to do the characters."

"So what will he do? The show's already gotten so strange. How can it get any stranger?"

"I don't know," Emily answered, "but—oh, hush, it's on."

The local station identified itself as it always did before a syndicated program. And then although Woody always started off by speaking, he had never opened with music,

this time he did, playing the one song they hadn't heard all summer, Jeff's song, "Dock of the Bay."

Emily felt numb, this had to mean something, but she didn't know what. Then as the final notes faded, there came a voice, a strange voice, one they didn't recognize, which said, "This is an encore presentation of the Cal Kirkland show."

It was a rerun. Woody wasn't there.

sixteen

Emily took her blazer, her sensible three-season navy blazer off the back of the kitchen booth. She grasped the cuffs of her white shirt, slipped the blazer on, then smoothed her sensible gray skirt.

"I didn't know you dressed like that," LeeAnn remarked. "I liked your suit Friday better."

Emily picked up her purse. "So did I."

On Friday Emily had been wearing a suit like the one she had worn the day she'd gone to the high school to see Jeff, one that was clearly a fashion item, a soft linen in an icy raspberry color. Three years ago she had stopped dressing like a man; boxy blazers and pinstripes didn't prove that you were successful but did reveal that you were too insecure to dress like a woman. But this morning, she had reached for the back of her closet. To hell with being feminine.

"Are you still angry at Jeff?" LeeAnn asked.

Emily picked up her attaché case. "Jeff who?"

"Do you want us to come in and have lunch with you?" Steve asked.

He sounded concerned. Emily shook her head. "No, I can manage."

She stepped out her front door. A light wind had come up in the night, blowing away the thick humidity that had

smothered the city the week before. The sky was clear, the air dry. It would be a nice walk to the train, a good way—

Emily stopped. At the curb was a car. It was Jeff's, and he was there, leaning against the car, waiting. Jeff.

Her anger surged back, a hard, red knot. She felt more betrayed by this than by anything he had done before. Going back to Britta, leaving two weeks ago—those acts had made sense, she could understand them, but this? It made no sense, none at all.

But, however angry she was, however justified she was in feeling angry, she wasn't going to let him see it. He wasn't going to know how he had hurt her, not ever.

She said his name.

And he said hers.

"Have you been out here long?"

"No." He nodded toward Steve's car. "I see that Steve's here."

"And LeeAnn too." Emily shifted her attaché case to the other hand. "She didn't want to stay in the room Steve's renting so they are both here." This was good, she wasn't sounding angry, she wasn't sounding upset, perhaps a little cool, but nothing more. She was in complete control. This was exactly what she wanted to be, what all her years in business had trained her to be.

And who the hell cared?

"Why did you do it, Jeff? How could you be so . . . Didn't you listen last night? Woody didn't do his show. He may never do it again."

"I know that. I thought that might happen."

Emily stared at him. "Then how could you do such a thing?"

"I was worried about him."

"Worried about him? My God, we were all worried about him, but you didn't see the rest of us blabbing to the papers, making it impossible for him to go on with his show."

"Maybe this is what he wanted."

"What he wanted? You can't be serious. All summer long you've been saying the exact opposite, that Woody would not want to see us, that he wouldn't—"

"But something's happening to him. Something's very wrong."

Emily paused. There was no arguing with that.

"Maybe this is what he needed," Jeff went on, "what we all needed."

"What we all needed?" How could he say these things? They were so unbelievable. "Are you out of your mind? I don't need this. Didn't you ever stop to think about how this would affect me? Do you have any idea what I have to face today, the kind of crap?"

Jeff stepped back, surprised, looking as if he didn't know what she was talking about. "Emily—"

"I have a job, and it's not an easy one." She was angry. Talking this way—it felt good. "It's essential that people take me seriously, that there be a certain level of professional respect. Do you have the faintest idea how hard things are going to be for me today?"

"What are you talking about? What's gotten into you?" And now he was starting to sound mad too.

"Nothing. Nothing that wouldn't get into anyone who had a normal life. Not all of us have such temporary lives that we can get away with little stunts like this."

"Stunts? Oh, I see." His voice was tight, sarcastic. "Excuse me, I was slow for a moment, but now I understand. Let me see if I have this right. I communicated with the media for the sole purpose of making things difficult for you professionally, and presumably"—his voice was tight—"I did this because with this temporary life of mine, I have no career of my own?"

"I didn't say that."

"But you thought it."

"I have to go to work." Emily turned.

"Oh, come on." Jeff grabbed her arm. "You aren't so important that you can't wait five minutes—even if it is to talk to someone who only makes half what you do."

Emily shook herself free. How had this become an attack on her? "It's none of my business what you choose to do for a living, Jeff Grant. I'm only concerned about what I do for a living. And right now you've made that goddamn difficult."

"If that's all you care about, then fine." He wheeled toward his car.

Emily was not going to let him have the last word. "If you don't believe me, come to work with me and see."

He spoke over his shoulder. "Surely *you* aren't admitting that there's something you can't handle."

"Oh, I can handle it all right."

He started to speak, but Emily refused to listen. She jerked open her car door, started the engine and backed out into the street without looking at him again.

Traffic on the Drive was terrible; it had been stupid not to take the train, but Emily didn't care. She drummed her fingers against the steering wheel as she inched forward, now so angry with Jeff that all her dread of the day had vanished. Of course she could handle this. She didn't need to hide behind a navy blazer.

There was a park-and-lock lot two blocks from work. Emily turned into the garage, found a space, and locked the car doors. The light wind she had felt out in Wilmette hit dead against the Sears Tower, funneling down the side of the building, gaining angry strength until it reached the ground spurting out in every direction. This was the worst kind of wind, a wind diverted from its natural course, gusting fiercely, pointlessly. Emily had to lace her fingers through her hair, holding it back from her face.

She jerked open the door to her building. At the first tier of elevators, she punched the call button. Through the doors she heard a bell announce the doors closing on some other floor and then she heard the whirl and crunch as the motors and cables started.

The elevator arrived empty and made no stops until the doors swept open at the fourteenth floor. Emily strode through the halls, speaking to no one, looking into none of the offices.

"Oh, Emily, Emily." Ann Marie started to rise from her desk while still shuffling through her papers. "I brought you a copy of Sunday's paper. I knew you would want an extra." She thrust out a page of newsprint. "Isn't this exciting, that it was actually you? I was so thrilled to see your name in the paper. I was reading along and then I noticed your picture, just out of the blue, there it was, your picture."

Emily refused to take the paper. "Ann Marie, we deal with celebrities. People you know have their names in the paper all the time. What is so special about this?"

Ann Marie faltered. "I don't know . . . it just is. I mean, you expect to see their names, but . . ."

"I'll be at a meeting all morning. I only stopped to get some papers."

Emily started into her office. "Oh, Liz wants to see you," Ann Marie called to her. "She's—"

"Tell Liz she'll have to wait."

But Liz was already in Emily's office, standing at the window, a copy of the *Tribune* in her hand. She was angry too.

She stabbed at the paper with her finger. "Did you know this was coming out?"

Emily dropped her attaché case on her desk. "I had an idea, yes."

"Then why didn't you tell me? For God's sake, Emily, Bob Hutchinson is my client. I'm supposed to know what's coming down the pike. Since when does a Hemphill client open the paper on Sunday morning to be surprised?"

"Believe me, I would have done anything to stop it."

"You should have let *me* try—I mean, he is my client. And even if we couldn't have stopped it, we should have had a chance to manage it. I don't believe it." Liz threw up her hands. "Here we've talked about this show week after week, and you never said a thing, you never gave any of us a clue."

"It wasn't anyone else's business."

"Yes, it was. When it involves a client, it's the company's business. I had to call Bob yesterday morning and admit that this was a total surprise to me."

Was that all Liz cared about? A client? So Emily hadn't been thinking about Bobby Hutchinson. So she hadn't been thinking about the agency and its responsibilities. What did any of that compare to what Jeff had done to her?

She flipped through a stack of folders on her desk, finding the one she needed. "Look, Liz, we can talk about this all you want some other time, but right now I've got a meeting." She opened her attaché case, thrust the folder inside, and swung the case off her desk, all without looking at Liz.

The meeting was a presentation by a major real estate developer over on Clark Street. Emily was careful to arrive exactly seven minutes late. People were still milling about

the carpeted conference room, drinking coffee, being greeted by members of the firm. The men were all in dark business suits with white shirts and striped ties. The few women were quietly dressed as well. It was not the sort of crowd that rewarded eccentricity, that admired the interesting. Emily started for the coffee urn.

"Well, well, if it isn't Leslie, Written in Stone's finest."

Ty Axelrod had broken away from a group. The last time Emily had seen him she had been sprawled across Chicago's sidewalks.

"I couldn't believe it," he continued. "That was really you? What a riot. I've been listening to that show all summer and to think, it was you. Did you actually get eight hundred on the math SAT?"

If he had to remember something, at least it was that. "No, it was only seven-ninety-eight."

The people who had been talking to Ty clustered around her, wanting to join their conversation.

Emily spoke quickly. She was going to do her own explaining. "A boy I went to high school with has a radio show with some continuing characters. Apparently the show's pretty autobiographical. He talks about various friends, including me and my SAT scores. It was in the paper yesterday."

"Oh, that's right," another remembered. "I saw that. It was a nice picture of you."

"Thank you."

"Did I miss something?" a third asked. "My wife read me part of the article since we do like the show, but she didn't say anything about you."

"It was only a bit in a sidebar." Emily tried to sound casual.

"Only a bit in a sidebar?" Ty exclaimed. "My God, she's Leslie. The character, it's based on our own Emily Gordon."

The others were amazed. "You're joking!" one exclaimed. "Those things every week—they happened to you?"

"No, not all," she answered. "Some did, but mostly it's the general outline of the character, that's all."

And then they were all talking at once. "What about Skip? Did you have a boyfriend like that?"

". . . didn't know you'd been married. I thought Leslie and Skip were planning to get married right after . . ."

". . . had to watch a snake eat a mouse in biology. A girl almost fainted, just like . . ."

". . . what happened last night? Why wasn't there a show last night?"

". . . I always liked that Arnold guy. What ever happened . . ."

". . . my favorite was when he talked about the old lady teachers writing on the blackboards, how the flab on their upper arms would shake. That was . . ."

Emily did fine; of course she did, answering their questions lightly, making it seem as if this didn't bother her, as if every minute of this weren't torture. But as often as she could, she tried to talk about the presentation they were all here for, and finally Stephen Krumsteadt responded, saying he would feel a lot better about the deal if he knew who the subcontractors were.

Emily could have kissed him. "Don't you remember? They were the characters behind that LuvCo venture two years ago."

Suddenly the others stopped talking, stopped carrying on about snakes and mice, SATs and school suspensions. Emily's past was amusing, but this was their passion. "They were?" Ty asked. "Are you sure?"

Of course, she was sure. This wasn't the sort of thing she was ever wrong about and every one of them knew it. "Why do you think they scheduled this for August when we're all too hot to think?"

"It certainly raises a lot of interesting questions," Stephen said.

"Doesn't it though?" Emily agreed. "So why don't we sit down and start asking?"

When Emily returned to the agency later that afternoon, Ann Marie had a fistful of phone messages. One phrase appeared over and over—"Called about *Trib* article." Emily dropped each one of those into her trash can, a steady rain of pink slips not even heavy enough to force open the plastic bag that the cleaning staff had lined the can with the night before.

She picked up the phone to start returning the other calls when she heard a light tap on her door. It was Stuart.

She put the phone down and braced herself. This would be the worst; Stuart loved to tease. For the first week she had been back in the office after her sprain, he had pretended to stumble every time he saw her. What would he do now? This was so much more interesting than a simple sprain.

"What do you know about professional croquet?" he asked.

She blinked. "Not a lot. No, that's not true. I don't know a thing about it. I know that it exists, and that's it."

"I'm thinking of talking to Crispin about doing some client development on their circuit. What do you think?"

"Is there any money in it?"

"Not in the sport, goodness, no. But I think there'd be a lot of exciting endorsements if we can find a player who looks right—real Brit type stuff, you know, gin and tonics, tea, umbrellas. Do you think I ought to pitch it to Crispin?"

"You're great at endorsements."

He drew up, startled at the compliment. Emily rarely paid compliments. "Well, I am." His voice was defensive.

"I know you are."

He looked at her suspiciously and then moved on, leaving her sitting at her desk, clutching her messages, thoroughly astonished.

Stuart had forgotten. Not permanently, of course—she would still be hearing about Leslie. But for the moment, he had forgotten.

Throughout the day, perhaps half the people she spoke to commented on the article, but very soon settled down to business. The rest did not mention it.

Late in the afternoon, her boss came into her office. "So have you survived your fifteen minutes of fame?"

Emily put down her pen. "Am I nuts?"

Crispin sat down. "Probably, but we still like you . . . and more importantly, we still take you seriously."

That, of course, had been exactly what Emily had worried about.

"You're not at the bank anymore," he went on. "You can be human, you can have a personal life and still do your job."

Emily pushed her bangs off her forehead. "Why is that such a major revelation?"

"Because you're you. I did say something about it when you started working here."

"You did?" She shook her head. "I don't remember."

"You weren't ready to hear it. That's why I shut up about it. I figured you'd have to get it on your own."

Emily shook her head, trying to imagine herself in his situation. What would she have done, managing someone like herself? She would have taken that young woman by the throat and shaken her. *Relax, lighten up, be yourself,* she would have said to a poor creature straight out of business school, who knew nothing about herself except the size of her student loans.

She looked at her boss again. "When am I ever going to get the hang of this?"

He smiled. "Next Thursday. But in the meantime, why don't you go talk to Liz? She was pretty angry this morning."

"I'm afraid she had reason to be. I should have told her about the article."

"Of course you should have," he said mildly. "But we can't always put our clients first, even if we should. I'm going to keep out of it, but it sounds to me like maybe Liz made a mistake too, thinking only of her client and not at all about you."

Emily had to agree. Liz might be Bobby's agent, but she was Emily's friend, and that was important too.

But Emily wasn't going to say anything about it. She wasn't in any position to preach. No woman who walked out on a man who was standing in her bedroom, saying "about last night . . ." had any business lecturing anyone else on their priorities.

So she and Liz made up as friends who are also colleagues must always do. Emily made her apology, and Liz admitted that the damage was not bad. She had called Bobby again. He now had gotten a copy of the *Tribune,* and he wasn't upset. But his family was wild with curiosity. Could Emily call him at home this evening and give him more details? Emily said that she would be happy to.

That Emily and Liz had to get along and they both knew it

made this conversation reasonably easy, but Emily was conscious as she sat in traffic on the way home that she had a more difficult, more important reconciliation to face at home . . . if Jeff had stayed to hear her.

And if he hadn't, she was taking tomorrow off from work and driving downstate to see him. She had so much to say to him, so much to apologize for.

Her anger had faded. Ironically, his talking to Christine Zimmer had been wonderful for her. In fact, hadn't he said something like that? That this was something they all needed?

Actually, she didn't know what he had said. She hadn't been listening. The minute this had happened she had reverted to her old ways, trying so hard to control both herself and the conversation, that she had lost control of her temper and everything else.

She turned her corner. Jeff's car was still there. She pulled into the drive, hurried inside. Steve and LeeAnn came out of the kitchen, crossing through the living room to meet her.

"How was it?" LeeAnn asked.

"Not bad. I'll tell you about it, but first, where's Jeff?"

"Out back." LeeAnn reached out for Emily's purse and attaché case.

Emily opened the side door. Often at this time of day, the neighborhood rang with the cries of kids playing touch football, but today the yards were quiet. She moved around to the back of the house. Jeff was sitting on one of the nylon-webbed lawn chairs, his legs stretched out, his hands laced behind his head. A ray of the late afternoon sun glittered against the copper highlights of his hair. He heard her step and stood up, turning toward her.

"I'm glad you stayed," she said.

"LeeAnn wouldn't let me leave," he admitted. "Although after the way she talked to me, I wanted to do a lot more than leave town." He was standing in front of her, his hands in his pockets, his shoulders tensed, his eyes dark. "Emily, I was so wrong. I didn't even think of you, how this was going to affect you."

"That's an apology?" she said teasingly. "That you *forgot* about me?"

He drew back, puzzled at her light tone. "I hate to say it, but I did."

"You were thinking about Woody?" She did remember him saying that much.

He nodded. "I can't explain it, but I had this notion that he was trying to say something to me, that he wanted me to do something."

"That doesn't sound like you." Jeff had never been a person to follow inexplicable impulses.

"That's hardly an argument against it."

"So talking to the reporter was what you did to help?" Emily tried hard to keep her voice neutral. She wasn't judging; she simply didn't understand.

And he didn't either. "It doesn't make much sense, but it was all I could think of, and once I started talking to Christine, I was sure that this was the right thing to do. I knew it might make him quit, but I somehow believed that that's what he wanted. It sounds unbelievably arrogant when I spell it out like that, but I wanted so much to help him."

Emily was not going to argue. She too was not a person who trusted intuition much, but in the last few weeks, she had come to think that Jeff's instincts might be surer than his conscious rationalizations. Certainly she believed in the impulse that kept drawing him to her. She tucked her hand in his arm. "With that kind of muddle going on in your head, I can see why you didn't think about me."

"That's nice of you, but I think it's more complicated than that." He pulled free and moved back over to the chair, running one hand over its aluminum tubing frame. "The last few weeks . . . I guess you might say I've been hit with a spot of depression."

Emily sat down on the chaise. "Ever since finding out about Mr. Crockett?"

He stiffened. "I don't know about that. It's probably, as you said this morning, that so much of my life is temporary."

Emily felt sure that Mr. Crockett had a lot to do with the difficult time he had been having, but she certainly wasn't going to force him to admit it. She was just glad to know that

his silence hadn't had anything to do with his feelings for her.

He went on. "Anyway, one of the symptoms was a complete inability to think about anything complex or stressful . . . and you were at the top of that list."

"That's romantic."

"Actually it is. The reason I couldn't think about you was the minute that I did I would have had to admit that I love you."

A butterfly, so unusual in this area anymore, flitted by, landing for a moment on the spirea bush.

"I do," he went on, sitting down next to her. "Love you, that is. All summer long I've been not thinking about it, hiding from it, but I do."

Emily leaned her cheek against his arm. "I guess I know that."

"But I don't know where that gets us. This should be lovely, falling in love with you, but this is the third time I've done it, and I seem to be getting worse at it. My life is such a mess right now. My loving you isn't going to do wonderful things for you. I wish it would, but it won't."

He sounded so sad, and that seemed like such a shame because he was making her so happy. True, he wasn't in any position to rearrange her life, to give her the ideal suburban happy ending, but she was doing a halfway decent job of getting that for herself. He was capable of tenderness, of fidelity. So what if he couldn't get a mortgage? She had one big enough for the both of them.

"My life is my own lookout," she answered calmly.

"I don't know. I think this is the kind of relationship that gets written up in *Cosmopolitan*—how to ruin your life in five easy stages."

Emily shook her head. "This may not end up as we thought it would when we were fifteen, but you're not going to ruin my life."

"You may be flattering me."

"No, if I'm flattering anyone, it's myself. It's not just you who's not going to ruin my life. No man is. Once I quit expecting Mr. Right to come along and solve all my problems, that took a lot of power away from Mr. Wrong."

"Well, this Mr. Wrong wishes that his life was in better

shape, or at least that there was some hope of straightening it out this year. I know it's time to get back on track, to leave teaching and start something new, but I'm not going to walk out on my contract."

"I never thought that you would," Emily answered. "But you can start making plans. You won't be changing careers overnight." She stood up. She was not going to give herself the chance to start badgering him with advice. When he was ready for it, he would ask.

"Speaking of self-flattery," she said, looking down at him, "you need to reassess this notion that you make half of what I do."

"Oh?" He looked at her inquiringly.

"You make a *fifth* of what I do."

"A fifth?" He stood up, suddenly himself again. "Then I'm going to have to start being a whole lot nicer to you, aren't I?"

"That's pretty much what I thought."

* * *

Emily guessed that LeeAnn understood everything that had passed between Jeff and herself out on the terrace and that Steve understood none at all. The two of them could average out their knowledge and come up with what they needed to know so she simply related what had happened at work, already able to laugh at herself for thinking people would care so much about what used to be inside her bra.

"But now I need to go call Bobby," she said when she finished. "He doesn't know a thing about the show and is frantically trying to explain it to his family."

Steve had already started dinner and was making enough noise that Emily went into the study to call. Bobby was indeed glad to hear from her. "I knew I'd see you at your sister's wedding, but my wife and kids couldn't begin to wait that long to know what this was all about."

So Emily explained, telling him all about the show. Just as she and Steve had done in the V.F.W. parking lot last spring, he listened with a sick fascination. "I have the tapes of most of the shows," she said. "Someone else has them right now, but when he's done, I can send them down if you want."

"Am I going to like this Lance fellow?"

Emily paused, thinking about all she had learned about Bobby since he had become a Hemphill client, about how articulate, how dedicated, how sensible he was, how he tried to balance a handicapped person's desire for access with a downstate businessman's dislike of government regulation. Then she thought about Lance, determined not to let elections for a black cheerleader come up and spoil his senior year.

So when she answered him, she told him the truth. "No, Bob, you won't."

"Is he a power-hungry, unreflective jock?"

"Yes."

Bobby sighed. "Well, it's what I deserve. That's how I used to be."

"It wasn't just you," Emily assured him. "We all came across . . . well, as teenagers. Some of the shows are kind of hard to listen to. It's no fun to be reminded of what you were once like."

"But I must have changed the most." And his voice grew more confiding. "One of the things that Liz made me see when she came down to help me rewrite my motivational speech is that the accident was the making of me. Once I would have given anything to play football again—anything at all—but now if I could choose between legs and the kind of person I am now, I'd stay in this chair."

Emily was sure that this was a part of the speech Liz had written; it was her kind of prose. Nonetheless it had an instant ring of truth to it, an honesty about a difficult fate endured, then accepted. "You know," she said after a moment, "there are some people who need to hear you say that, who still feel guilty about the accident."

"Guilty about the accident?" Bobby was obviously surprised. "For heaven's sake, why? I was driving. Why should anyone else feel guilty?"

"That's what I would have thought. But every time I turn around this summer, I find that someone else feels guilty about it. Jeff, Steve, and now even Woody, they all—"

Bobby interrupted. "Woody?"

Emily told him about Woody's radio version of the accident. "Don't ask me to explain it. He was completely uninvolved. I can't imagine why he would feel guilty."

The question was rhetorical—she never expected an answer.

But Bobby spoke carefully. "Anything I say would be a guess. You'll have to ask Woody himself."

Emily almost dropped the phone. Bobby knew. Or at least he had an idea.

But before she could say anything, he went on. "I can understand about Jeff. I suppose he had a case of survivor syndrome, but Steve . . . he was the hero of the thing."

Emily was not going to tell Steve's story, although she did want someone to tell her Woody's. "Perhaps he thought he could have done more."

"He certainly could have," Bobby answered swiftly. "He could have dragged me out of the car, like lots of people would have done, and then God only knows what shape I'd be in. Look, one thing I am aware of every day is how much worse things could have been. I have abdominal muscles, which makes all the difference in the world to a wheelchair athlete, and I have . . . well, I have my two daughters. That's what the medical personnel kept saying for months, how relieved they were that no well-meaning bystander had 'helped.'"

Emily closed her eyes, almost faint. All this time Steve had been berating himself for not having done more. "I hadn't heard that, and I'm sure that Steve hasn't either."

"You haven't? I thought everyone knew. If you know where Steve is, I'll call him right away. I'd like to tell him."

"Actually, he's here. I can get him if you want."

"That would be great."

Emily laid down the phone a little reluctantly. She would have liked to ask Bobby more about Woody, but it seemed clear that he did not intend to discuss him. She went back out into the kitchen.

"Me?" Steve said when she told him Bobby wanted to talk to him. "Why me?"

He looked uncomfortable, but Emily was not going to anticipate Bobby's story. She took the wooden spoon out of Steve's hand. "Go hear what he has to say."

Steve left, and Emily gave the contents of the skillet a tentative poke—she had no idea what any of it was—then

glanced over at LeeAnn who was staring at the kitchen phone as if willing it to fall off the hook and into her hands.

So Emily explained. "Sometimes," she concluded, "I guess it really is best to do nothing."

She paused, nobly giving Jeff and LeeAnn a chance to point out that they had been telling her that all summer. But they had the grace to keep quiet, so she changed the subject, telling them about the odd part of the phone call, that Bobby seemed to know something about Woody.

Jeff was shaking his head. "I am worried about him—Woody, I mean—and I've been thinking, maybe I should go down to Little Rock. I would have gone over the weekend if I thought I'd be able to find him."

A month ago Emily would have been on the phone, making reservations for a flight to Little Rock, for a hotel, for a car. But she was a different woman now. "No. If he wants us, he'll be able to find us."

seventeen

Emily did not want to go to work in the morning. As soon as the alarm went off, Jeff started poking her, pulling the covers off. "Someone who runs around bragging about how much money she makes ought to go to work."

He had a point, not a very good one, but a point nonetheless. "Nothing's going to happen this week," she complained. "Besides you guys are going to have such a good time today." Perhaps she had once not respected people who didn't have "bottom line" jobs, but they did know how to have fun.

"That's probably true," he agreed. Then he grew serious. "Shouldn't you save your unexcused absences in case Woody shows up?"

Now that was a good point.

And it turned out that Emily was wrong about nothing happening this week. Liz's client Joe Mannell was having his hand operated on. He had injured it in a title bout in June, and some doctors in Baltimore were attempting reconstruction.

Not all Hemphill clients came from the sort of family who was very good at standing up to the nation's health care establishment so when an important client went into the hospital for a performance-related injury, someone from the

agency usually went along to question the doctors, bully the orderlies, and ignore visiting hours. Certainly that had been Liz's intention.

"I don't know what's happened to my mind," she moaned, slumping down in the chair across from Emily's desk. "I set up appointments with his doctors, I made hotel reservations for his mother and me, but then never wrote it on my calendar."

"And you can't go?" Emily asked. "What's up?"

"Our Lamaze class. Mason's already missed two. We'll be thrown out if we don't both show up to all the rest."

"Thrown out of a Lamaze class? You have to be kidding."

"No, I'm not. It happens . . . so, Emily, please, could you go?"

Emily had been expecting this. "It's not a good week for me, Liz. Why don't you ask Stuart? He didn't travel much at all this winter. He owes us."

"You're right," Liz sighed. "Of course you are. I just hate to ask. They're so busy with Morgan right now."

And I'm not busy?

In five minutes both Stuart and Liz were back in her office. He couldn't go either. He and his wife had scheduled interviews with eleven different housekeepers over the next few days. "We've had to reschedule so many times that the agency said they won't work with us if we cancel again."

Emily looked at the two of them, standing there, so confident she would go.

She shouldn't judge. The life of a two-career family must be full of pressures, frustrations, compromises, that no one on the outside could understand. But did everything always have to be a crisis?

Emily had been raised to be a good girl, to be able to do anything, take care of anything, but she had her own little family now. Steve and LeeAnn—trying to find some ground on which they could be together. Jeff—having once again turned to her at his neediest. And Woody—it made no sense, this feeling that Woody was coming, but still she believed it, believed that she needed to stay home for him as much as for the others. "I'm sorry, guys, but I can't go either."

Liz blinked, surprised. "Ann Marie said you didn't have

anything important on your calendar. I know you've done lots of traveling for both of us, but we can't stand Joe up. If you do this for me, I'll make it up to you. I promise."

"I know you mean that." Emily tried to speak gently. She had to go on working with these two. "But I don't think you're being very realistic. You aren't going to want to travel after the baby is born."

Liz started to speak, then stopped. There was nothing to say.

Stuart drew himself up. "Emily, you are not being fair," he said self-righteously. "Liz and I have to do things for our children. They must be our first priority."

Talk like that used to paralyze Emily, making her feel so old-maidish that she would agree to anything. "And that's great, that's the way it should be," she agreed. "But your children aren't my first priority, they aren't my responsibility. I've helped you both a lot, and I will help you again, but this time I can't."

Ten minutes later Crispin was in her office. "It was my understanding," he said calmly, "that as a single woman, you had no responsibilities, no interests, that could possibly interfere with your doing whatever everyone else hasn't time for."

Emily smiled. She did like him. "I'm afraid that used to be true, but a lot is happening at the moment."

"Good things I hope?"

"In part, but I'm not staying home just because I've met some man. I wouldn't do that. Are we being terribly unfair to Joe?"

"If we are, it's on Liz's head, not yours."

He obviously meant that. Emily leaned forward. "Crispin, what are we going to do when she's on maternity leave?"

"You said that you could handle it."

"And I can, but I don't want to."

"Then what do you suggest?"

"I'd like an assistant," Emily heard herself say. "And not a glorified secretary, but an M.B.A. who could really help, someone who wants to learn the business."

Crispin was sitting back in his chair, flexing his fingers, smiling.

"What's so funny?" she demanded.

"I've been wondering when you'd get around to this."

Emily sighed. He was right. Three months ago she couldn't have stood the thought of an assistant; an assistant had to be given responsibility, an assistant had to be managed. But it had been a long three months. She wasn't Leslie anymore.

* * *

Jeff had to come into the Loop to pick up a suitcase that his neighbor had packed and put on the afternoon bus. LeeAnn and Steve came with him, and they met Emily for dinner. They stopped on the way home to rent a movie and as Emily was unlocking the door, she heard the phone ring. Jeff sprinted into the kitchen to answer it.

"Emily Gordon's residence," Emily heard him say. "Just a moment please."

He covered the mouthpiece and handed Emily the receiver. "I think it's your mother."

"Mother?" That was odd. Her parents usually called in the morning. Emily took the phone, pulling on the cord so she could sit down in the booth. "Hello."

It was indeed her mother. "Do you have company?"

"That was Jeff. He and Steve and LeeAnn Summer are all here."

"They are? How nice. Do you have enough room?"

Emily wondered if her mother was asking about sleeping arrangements. "Yes, plenty."

"I'm glad that they are all there because your friend David stopped by, and—"

David? Who on earth was David? Emily jerked upright. Of course. Adults had always used his first name. "Woody? He was there?"

Emily turned to signal to the others, but they had heard her exclamation and were coming into the kitchen, listening.

"Yes," Glenda answered. "He came to the house, looking for you. I don't know why he thought you still lived here, but—"

"Is he there now?"

"No, I invited him in, but he stayed on the front porch.

He asked where you lived now so I gave him your address and phone number. I hope that was right."

"Goodness, yes." So Woody was coming.

"But, Emily, he doesn't look well."

Emily frowned. "Not well? What do you mean?"

"His color is bad. He seemed a little disoriented."

"He might have been driving all day."

Her mother agreed. Emily promised to let her know what happened, then hung up. She turned to the others. "He may be on his way here. Mother gave him my address."

"How long will it take him?" Steve asked.

"Four hours."

LeeAnn looked at her watch. "So he should be here around twelve?"

"Unless he stops."

They decided to leave the porch light on and watch the movie. They filed into the study and sat down, Steve and LeeAnn on the sofa, Emily in the chair with Jeff leaning back against her legs. Emily paid no attention to the movie, and she didn't imagine that anyone else did either. It was going to be a long evening.

At ten-thirty LeeAnn made some coffee. At eleven, they were all sitting in the kitchen booth, hardly speaking. They were still there at midnight.

"He may have stopped to get something to eat," Jeff said.

At one, LeeAnn announced that she was going to bed. At one-fifteen she was back in the kitchen, having taken off her jewelry. "This is awful. Do we know for sure that he's coming?"

"No," Emily answered.

She sat down. "Then how long do we wait up?"

"Until he comes."

At one-thirty, LeeAnn and Jeff started to play gin rummy at the kitchen table. Emily put her head on Jeff's arm and stared blankly at his cards.

At two-twenty, Steve straightened. "Is that something?"

"I don't know." Emily hadn't heard anything, but she didn't have Steve's acute hearing. "I'll go see."

Once she was in the living room, she heard a soft knocking. She hurried to open the door, undoing the deadbolt, twisting the knob. She knew who would be behind

that door, she knew exactly who it would be, and she reminded herself to add sixteen years.

Even so, even after that reminder, she thought it was someone else, some stranger. This person was fat, obese. Flesh swelled his body, spilling down from his jaw, disappearing into his shirt. His hand, lifted again to knock, bulged with soft sausages for fingers. This wasn't Woody. It couldn't be.

"Emily?"

But it was Woody. The voice was his, the familiar, warm, rich baritone she'd been listening to all summer. She reached out her hands. "Oh, Woody, I'm so glad you came."

He didn't answer, and in a moment, she let her hands drop. "Won't you come in? We're all in the kitchen."

She started across the room, but had to turn back. He had not crossed the threshold.

"I thought you still lived at home," he said.

She shook her head. *No, Leslie's seventeen and she lives at home. I'm a grown woman; I have my own house.*

"No," she said. "I live here, and right now I have visitors." Visitors? Why was she calling them visitors? "Jeff and Steve are here. You remember them—Jeff Grant and Steve DeLoss."

"Jeff?" Woody stepped back. "Jeff is here?"

"Yes, and everyone's eager to see you." She reached out, took his arm, urging him in. The arm was soft, thick.

He followed her slowly. In the kitchen, the others were on their feet. Emily wasn't sure what to do. Why was this so awkward? "You remember Jeff and Steve. And this is LeeAnn, LeeAnn Summer."

Jeff stepped forward, his hand out, but Woody turned, not looking at him, speaking instead to LeeAnn. "I don't know you, do I?"

"No," she answered. "But I'm happy to meet you. I've been looking forward to it."

I don't know you, do I? That was how small children talked. This was Woody, thirty-four, fluent, imaginative, talking like a five-year-old. Emily gestured toward the bench, intending to have him sit down, then stopped, not sure if he would fit in the booth. He was so very large. "Can I get you anything? Something to drink? Or eat?"

Her mother was right. He looked awful.

"Do you have any apple juice?" he asked.

"Oh, no, I don't think so. Steve?"

Steve shook his head. "I haven't bought any."

"Perhaps something else?" Emily offered. "Coffee? Tea? Beer? Wine?"

Woody didn't say anything.

"Or soda? There's all kinds. And hard drinks . . . gin, vodka, Scotch . . ."

Woody still didn't answer. Emily stopped talking.

LeeAnn spoke up. "Why don't we all go sit in the living room?" Her tone was bright, as if she had said something startling and original.

But it sounded good to Emily. "Yes, yes. Let's go sit in the living room."

They went in, Woody trailing behind them. He waited until they were all seated, then sat on the sofa next to LeeAnn. The frame underneath the Regency-striped upholstery creaked.

Jeff spoke. "Did you have a good trip up?"

Woody looked at him blankly, then turned back to LeeAnn. "Do you know where the bathroom is?"

LeeAnn told him. He murmured some form of excuse, then twisting toward the end of the sofa, he planted both hands on the side bolster and pushed, trying to stand up. Emily turned away, uncomfortable at this display of awkwardness, grossness. He plodded across the room, going into the bathroom, closing the door.

They all stared at one another.

Steve spoke first. "He looks awful."

"He wasn't like this in high school?" LeeAnn asked.

"No," Emily answered. "I hardly recognized him. Mother said that he didn't look well, but coming from her, that could have meant that he needed a haircut."

LeeAnn started to say something, but broke off as the bathroom door opened. Woody sat back down on the sofa and looked at his hands.

Jeff tried to talk to him, but Woody would only speak to LeeAnn, asking her if she was sure that there was no apple juice. None of them knew what to do; even Jeff grew silent. Woody went to the bathroom again.

"What do you think is wrong with him?" Emily whispered as soon as the bathroom door closed.

"I don't know," Jeff answered. "But that's not Woody."

"It's like talking to a child," LeeAnn said. "From listening to him all summer . . . I don't know, I really wanted to meet him—not just because you all knew him—but at least in the early shows, because he sounded like he would be such a wonderful man, so understanding, so forgiving. He's nothing like I expected."

"He's nothing like we expected," Jeff replied.

Emily took a breath. "Is he on drugs?"

It was what they had all been thinking. "He is disoriented," Jeff answered.

"But I thought drugs, cocaine, made you thin," Steve said.

"Not necessarily," LeeAnn said, but couldn't go on. The bathroom door opened, and once again Woody came out, sat down next to LeeAnn, and in a moment for the third time asked for apple juice.

Jeff stood up. "We'll go check," he said. "If there isn't any, we'll go get some. Emily, come with me."

Emily followed him into the kitchen. "It's almost three. Do you really think we should go out and get apple juice?"

He waited to be sure that the door had swung closed. "No, I think we should take him to the hospital. Is there one nearby?"

"Yes, in Evanston . . . but is that the right thing to do? I don't know much about this."

"I don't either, but I don't have any other ideas. Excuse me for sounding like a Gordon, but going to the hospital would at least be something to do."

"I guess it would be better than sitting around here," Emily admitted. Anything would be better than that.

"Then let's have LeeAnn tell him," Jeff suggested. "She's the only one he's talking to. And do you mind if she drives your car? It's the most comfortable for the five of us, and if she drives, he can sit up front with her."

"That's fine with me." Emily pushed open the living room door. "Oh, LeeAnn," she called pleasantly, "could you come in here for a moment?"

LeeAnn came in. Jeff explained about going to the hospi-

tal. She agreed with the notion, but frowned at her own part in it. "What am I supposed to say? 'Thanks for stopping by, Woody, Emily doesn't have any apple juice, what about being hospitalized instead?' If this is a drug problem, he's going to resist the idea of a hospital."

"We won't know until we try," Jeff said. "Coming here, he may be asking for help. Do you mind being the one to tell him?"

"Oh, Lord, I suppose not," she sighed. "Why waste all those years of being the big sister?"

Back in the living room, LeeAnn sat down next to Woody and was honest, telling him that they were concerned and wanted him to see a doctor.

"Right now?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered confidently, but then couldn't seem to think of a reason why they had to go now. She glanced around the room for inspiration. "Emily has to go to work in the morning."

Emily wondered what that had to do with anything, but it seemed to convince Woody. He waited until everyone else was standing. Then he hoisted himself up and followed them outside.

At the foot of the porch steps, he stopped, leaning heavily on the railing. Emily was afraid he was going to ask for juice again.

"Does anyone have any gum?"

Jeff was already halfway to Emily's car. He stopped, turned, and pulled something out of his pocket. He handed Woody a package of gum.

Jeff did not chew gum. Emily wondered what instinct had told him to have some now.

LeeAnn took Emily's keys and unlocked the front passenger door. Once Woody was in, she bent down to pull the seat belt out to its greatest length, fastening it for him as if he were a child. Emily slid into the middle of the rear seat. Steve and Jeff sat on either side of her.

They rode silently with Emily leaning forward occasionally to give LeeAnn instructions. Woody spoke once, not to anyone, just speaking. "Something is wrong with me."

LeeAnn reached across the car, touching him. "I know. That's why we're going to a doctor."

At the hospital, LeeAnn was the ideal big sister. She handled everything, registering Woody, talking to the nurse, while Emily, Steve, and Jeff sat in the molded plastic chairs that were lined up against the wall.

"I'm sorry that LeeAnn's having to do all this," Emily said to Steve. "It's not her responsibility. She's never met him."

"She doesn't mind. She likes short-term responsibility."

Emily glanced at him, startled at his insight. That did describe LeeAnn. She liked people; she was interested in their problems. She didn't mind taking care of them, doing things for them, but at the end of the day she wanted to go home alone—a fine baby-sitter, not much of a parent.

It was a good thing that Steve understood that.

Finally a nurse escorted Woody away, and LeeAnn came back to the line of chairs.

"Did he have insurance?" Emily asked, wanting, as always, to have the financial questions settled first.

"He said he didn't, but there was a card in his wallet that seemed up-to-date. He guessed it was from work, but he didn't seem to know."

"That sounds like Woody," Jeff said. "What did you say his symptoms were?"

"Disorientation. The nurse didn't ask anything else. I suppose that's the common euphemism."

They all fell silent, unhappy at the thought of what Woody had done to himself. The vending machine coffee was bad, and the plastic chairs were molded to encourage a slouch, comfortable at first, but eventually wearying. The magazines were tattered, outdated. Emily read *People*'s profile of "The World's Sexiest Man," then passed it to LeeAnn. Steve read *Black Entrepreneur*. Jeff corrected the grammar in the evangelists' little brochures.

More than an hour later, the doors partitioning off the treatment cubicles swung open. A doctor came out, introducing himself. His English was not good, and a nurse hurried over to be sure that they understood him.

The news was that more tests needed to be run.

"What exactly are you testing for?" Jeff asked carefully.

The doctor said something.

The nurse translated. "Diabetes."



"Diabetes?" Emily felt her mouth drop open. "But we thought—" She stopped.

The nurse smiled at her, understanding. "No, if there's been substance abuse, it's been with sugar."

LeeAnn was shaking her head. "Diabetes. I should have guessed. Excessive thirst, frequent urination, dramatic weight change—the Indian Health Service has all these posters about the symptoms."

"How bad is it?" Emily asked the nurse. She remembered the movie where Jackie Gleason had to have his toes amputated.

Woody had been, the nurse reported, twelve to twenty-four hours away from a coma, but his circulation seemed fine, and his eyesight hadn't been damaged. The doctor was going to admit him to the hospital until his condition stabilized.

LeeAnn went up to see him settled in his room, and so it was nearly six by the time they got back to Wilmette. Emily showered, dressed for work, and drank four cups of coffee. Steve was concerned. "Don't you want to take a nap or something?"

"It's all right," Emily answered. "One of the men I work with is always moping around because the baby kept him up all night. Now it's my turn."

But instead it was Liz who was moping. Her husband had gotten tied up in a meeting and had again missed the childbirth class. The instructor had called Liz aside, telling her that this was a partner-oriented class. "So we're out." Liz was nearly in tears. "I could have gone to Baltimore after all."

Emily tried to be sympathetic. "They still have to let you have the baby, don't they?"

"But Mason can't be with me in the delivery room—not unless we've been to a class, that's the hospital's policy."

"Does Mason want to be there?" Emily thought his behavior suggested otherwise.

"Yes, yes, of course." Liz was horrified by the question. "How can you even think that?"

"I guess I didn't have enough sleep," Emily answered. "My brain's addled."

She spent the day on the phone, letting clients waste her

time, something she didn't do enough of, then left early, calling home first so that Steve could have dinner ready. They ate quickly, then set out for the hospital, LeeAnn holding a flower arrangement on her lap.

A bold sign in the hospital's main lobby announced that a patient could only have two visitors at a time, but LeeAnn knew Woody's room number so the four of them swept past the volunteer ladies at the reception desk.

The door to his room was ajar. Emily peered at the name slots. "Good. He has the room to himself."

"Even so," Jeff said, "the hospital probably has a point. Only two of us should go in. Let's not overwhelm him."

"It shouldn't be me," Steve said. "He never looked at me once."

"Me either," Jeff echoed. "So the two of you go." He gestured at LeeAnn and Emily. "Steve and I will wait out here."

LeeAnn was carrying the flowers so Emily tapped on the door lightly and when she heard no answer, she eased it open. The fading evening light outlined a white-covered mound on the bed closest to the window.

"Woody?" she spoke softly. "Are you awake?"

He rolled his head on the pillow. "Emily."

She came toward the bed, uncertain of what to say, having to fall back on what got said in every hospital room every day. "So how are you feeling?"

"Better." He struggled to sit up. Emily stepped forward, finding the cord to the little box whose buttons controlled the bed. She handed it to him, and in a moment, a mechanical whurr propelled his head and torso upward. "They say I have diabetes."

"I know. The doctor told us." Then she waved LeeAnn forward. "You remember LeeAnn, don't you? LeeAnn Summer."

"LeeAnn? Is that your name?" He put out his hand, an IV cord slithering down from a flesh-colored bandage that held a needle into his vein. "I remember you, but I didn't know your name."

LeeAnn set down the flowers and maneuvered her hand through the IV cord. "That's all right," she said brightly. "It

happens all the time, men not remembering your name in the morning."

It took him a moment, but he did smile at her joke. "You were nice to me." Then he turned back to Emily. "It must have been a surprise, my showing up like that."

Emily shook her head. "No, my mother called me. She said that you were coming."

He didn't answer, and Emily couldn't think of anything else to say.

Just as the silence felt awkward, LeeAnn spoke. "Do you have the same doctor you had last night? The one who couldn't speak English?"

"No." Woody rolled his head across the pillow. "They only let those guys out at night. During the day we all speak English." He plucked at his sheet, then spoke to Emily, not quite looking at her. "Do you know what I've been doing for the last year?"

She spoke gently. "Yes, Woody, we do."

"So you're not going to believe that I've been teaching astrophysics at Northeastern Bible College?"

She smiled. That was Woody. For the first time, he sounded like himself. "I'm afraid not."

"Then I'm surprised you let me in the door."

"There was never any question. We've been worried about you."

"Well, it—the show—was all crap." He pulled at the sheet again. "I'm quitting, you know. I'm not going back."

LeeAnn spoke. "If you aren't going back, is there someone we could call? To tell them you're all right so they won't worry?"

Woody shook his head. "They won't worry. I'm not Mr. Everybody's Favorite Boy. The kids—the daytime deejays—didn't like airtime being given to oldies, and the management types only liked how much money I made for them."

Emily thought that a very good reason for them to worry. "They'll need to make plans."

"Well, there's one person," he admitted. "She's the weekend receptionist, she's always been nice to me. She's probably nice to everyone. If she's nice to me, she's nice to small rocks. You could call her, except she won't be in until Saturday, and I don't know her home number."

"I'll find it." Emily took down the receptionist's name and the station's number. "Now Jeff and Steve are outside. Would you like to see them?"

Woody shifted, his bulk making the bed creak. "Good old Steve. What's he doing in these parts? Is he still playing the violin?"

"He had an operation on his wrist at the beginning of the summer, but he'll be going back to work soon. He's going to go back east right after Labor Day and see some of his old teachers. It looks like the National Symphony in Washington may give him an audition even though they usually don't hold them until spring. It's a good oppor—" Emily stopped. She was rambling. "Do you want to see him?"

Woody didn't answer, instead turning to LeeAnn. "How do you fit into this crowd?"

"I never thought I'd say it about myself," she answered, "but I'm someone's girlfriend."

"Girlfriend?" Woody blinked. He glanced quickly at Emily, then looked away.

LeeAnn answered the unasked question. "No, I'm afraid it's Mr. DeLoss who is the love of my life."

"Steve? You and Steve? You're a foot taller than he is."

LeeAnn looked puzzled so Emily answered. "He grew. Do you want to see him? Or are you too tired?"

"I have too many tubes coming out of my body. Maybe he could come back tomorrow and I won't have so many."

Emily and LeeAnn promised to return. LeeAnn asked him if he needed anything, a clock, some books, a radio—

"No, not a radio," he burst out. "I don't want a radio." He turned toward the window, silent, blocking them out.

Emily and LeeAnn exchanged glances. Radio was not the thing to talk about. They said good-bye, pulling the door shut behind them. LeeAnn leaned back against it, shaking her head. "That was so strange. Was that the same person we brought in here last night?"

Jeff and Steve hurried over. "How is he?" Jeff asked.

"Better," Emily answered. "He sounds more like himself, but when he talks about the show . . . I don't know." She wasn't going to try to explain. "You'll have to see for yourself."

"Shall we go in?"

She shook her head. "No, he's tired. Can you wait until tomorrow?"

"Of course."

They all started down the hall for the elevator. "What was that about Steve being short?" LeeAnn asked. "Steve's not short."

"I used to be," he answered. "When Woody knew me, I was."

"But he saw you last night. How could he think you were still short?"

"I imagine it's simple." Jeff put his hand across the elevator door, holding it open. "He may have seen Steve last night, but in his mind, he's still seeing Arnold."

Emily grimaced. "That's creepy."

Jeff let the elevator doors slide shut. He put his arm around her. "Imagine what he'll think when he realizes you aren't Leslie. He'll be expecting all that nice cushy Kleenex."

Emily knew that there was more she had to tell Jeff, but she waited until they were home. Although it was still early, Emily used her sleepless night the evening before as an excuse for going upstairs immediately.

As soon as she and Jeff were alone in her room, she spoke. "When LeeAnn and I talked to Woody, you might as well have not existed. We said you were both out in the hall, but he would only talk about Steve."

Jeff wasn't surprised. "I wondered last night if paranoia was replacing my depression. As much as he was ignoring everyone, it did seem like he was ignoring me the most."

"I thought so too. Do you think he realizes you talked to this reporter? But that doesn't make any sense. He sounded relieved about the show being over."

Jeff bent his head to drop a light kiss on her hair. "I don't think we should expect any of this to make sense."

Emily slept well that night and left for work early, seeing Jeff only as he was getting in from his run. He called her at work later in the day. He had spoken to Woody's doctor. "She says he can leave tomorrow, providing he has somewhere to go."

"He can come to my place. Of course, he can."

"And provided he gets help managing his diet."

"Of course."

"Then we'll go in and talk to the nutritionist."

They brought back a stack of pamphlets and Xeroxed articles about diabetes. When she got home, Emily paged through them while Steve and Jeff made dinner. After a few minutes, she looked up, overwhelmed. "This is incredible. It's so detailed."

"I know," LeeAnn agreed as she spread place mats on the table. "I can't even understand Weight Watchers. This is hopeless."

"I'll help as long as I can," Jeff said. "But I've got to report back to school in the middle of next week, and LeeAnn needs to be back at work after Labor Day. That leaves it all on your shoulders, and the nutritionist said it may take him six to eight weeks to be comfortable on his own."

Six to eight weeks? "I have to go home Labor Day weekend. It's Kelly's wedding."

But Kelly's wedding or not, this was going to be difficult. It would require someone continually thinking about food, someone shopping regularly for fresh produce. It was the sort of thing that Glenda Gordon would have done beautifully, that she would expect her daughters to do beautifully as well, but after one day of it Emily would have gone mad.

While Emily didn't have her mother's interest in food, while she didn't have her mother's need to wait on other people, she did have one thing her mother didn't—a terrific salary.

"So we'll hire someone," she said briskly. "I know an agency that will find us a nice lady who has raised three diabetic children and knows all this inside out. We'll pay her to do it."

"That will be awfully expensive," Jeff objected.

"So?"

"And Woody's not going to like having a stranger around," Steve added.

That was true. "We don't have any other choice."

"I don't know." This was Steve again. Emily looked up at him. He was flushed, mumbling. "I could stay."

The others were too surprised to speak. None of them had thought about him.

"I looked this over." He gestured at the papers, half-

apologizing. "And it's the sort of stuff I can do—the cooking's really simple, steaming vegetables and broiling chicken. I can do that."

"What about your career?" LeeAnn asked. "I thought this National Symphony thing would be your best hope until spring."

"I'll work something out," he answered. "I know that two months is a long time for Emily to have Woody and me in her house—"

"Don't worry about that," Emily interrupted. "I'm glad I've got the space. I just don't know that it makes sense for you to give up this opportunity to get your career started again when we can hire someone."

"I can get my career started any time—two months isn't going to matter that much, and this is . . . I don't know . . . this isn't going to happen again. It feels like the first time . . ." His voice trailed off.

But Emily could finish the sentence for him. "This feels like the first time someone has needed you."

"You know, that's it." Suddenly he was excited, no longer mumbling. "No one has ever needed me. My music, yes, that's been important to other people, but not me. Emily" —he turned to her—"I know you liked having me here this summer, but any number of people you would have liked. It didn't have to be me."

That was true. Emily wasn't going to say it, but it was true. She liked Steve, she liked him a lot, he was the only man in her life who was simply a friend. But Jeff was irreplaceable in a way that Steve was not.

"Even LeeAnn"—and now Steve was speaking clearly, with confidence—"I know you feel something, I know you care, but you don't need me."

LeeAnn drew back, startled, obviously never having expected him to speak so directly. "But that's my fault, not yours. I haven't let myself need you."

Emily stirred uneasily, wondering how to make a graceful exit. This was a private moment; Steve and LeeAnn needed to be alone. She glanced at Jeff. He was already on his feet. He wasn't aiming for a graceful exit; he was just going to leave.

But Steve was waving him to sit back down. "Fault's

neither here nor there. The truth is you don't need me. But I want to change that. Give me a chance. Let me practice on Woody, and then we'll see if we can find some way for you to need me too." He held out his hand to her.

"Oh, Steve . . ."

LeeAnn Summer was, Emily knew, capable of every perfect and practiced gesture. Emily expected her to rise elegantly, put her manicured hand in his, and murmur something encouraging.

But his sincerity disarmed LeeAnn. Her carefully shadowed eyes were blinking, her glossed lips were tight. She was trying not to cry.

She pressed her hands to her eyes for a moment, and when she at last looked up to speak to the man she loved, her quiet words seemed to get their dignity not from her poise, from the polished grace she had learned, but from her heritage. "If you want to try, I'll give it my very best."

So this was the plan that an hour later Emily and LeeAnn presented to Woody, who was still sick enough to agree.

"But Jeff will be there," Emily cautioned.

"Of course, he will," Woody answered blandly, with a look challenging her to disagree. "What's the problem with that?"

eighteen

Thursday morning Emily called in sick.

Ann Marie gasped. "But, Emily, you're never sick. Except when you sprained your ankle and that wasn't really sick."

"Did I say I was sick?" Emily countered. "I said I was calling in sick. There's a world of difference."

"Oh . . . I guess you're right. What shall I tell the others?"

"That I had to pick up the baby at day care."

It wasn't that far from the truth, she thought, as she and LeeAnn rode the elevator up to Woody's room. He was going to require considerable care and attention.

But no luggage. He was dressed in the clothes he had been admitted in and didn't want the books and magazines he had been reading.

"Well, I'm going to take these flowers," LeeAnn picked up the interesting arrangement of grapevine, baby's breath, and freesia that she and Emily had brought the first night. "I spent too long with that florist to abandon them."

Woody's other flower arrangement was a gaudy display of gladioli and birds of paradise that his station in Little Rock had sent. Emily eyed it uncertainly. It was nearly half her height.

Woody chuckled. "You'll look like Birnam Wood coming to Dunsinane."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Don't you remember? *Macbeth.* Junior year, Mrs. Van—"

He stopped, embarrassed. Miss Rowart had taught them *Macbeth* during junior year. Mrs. VanBank had taught Skip, Leslie, and C.J.

Emily didn't know what to say. She was glad to see the nurse coming into the room with a wheelchair.

Woody too seemed relieved. He made a great show of waving the wheelchair away. "I'm not getting in that thing. If I'm well enough to leave, I'm well enough to walk."

"Everyone says that," the nurse said and took his arm.

"Then I'm clearly not well enough to leave. If I can't be original, I shouldn't be out on the streets."

"Come along, Mr. Woodman." The nurse helped him lower himself into the chair. "Your friends are waiting."

Emily picked up Birnam Wood and followed the nurse out of the room. Steve and Jeff were waiting in the lobby. They both stood up as soon as Woody's little procession emerged from the elevator.

Woody spoke over his shoulder to Emily. "You're right. Steve has grown. But what about you, Jeff?" They were now close enough to the others to speak. "You didn't get as tall as Steve."

What an odd way to greet someone after so many years. Emily pushed a spray of gladiolus aside with her chin so that she could see better.

"Nor did you," Jeff returned.

"I've been concentrating my growth in another direction, something that the medical profession does not seem to appreciate."

LeeAnn laughed, but behind her floral screen, Emily shifted uneasily. Woody was challenging Jeff, testing him, competing with him . . . just like in high school. Surely they were too old for that.

But Woody was sick. If he still needed to be the funniest, the quickest, Emily hoped that Jeff was strong enough to let him.

The ride home was as different as could be from the ride to the hospital. Woody now dominated the conversation,

telling sharp anecdotes about hospital life, mimicking the foreign doctors' mastery of English, teasing LeeAnn for being so attractive. When he did speak to Jeff, his remarks were barbed.

LeeAnn and Steve had already moved their things into the basement, and Emily showed Woody where everything was in the guest room, then asked him if he'd like to rest before lunch.

"I might as well," he answered as if he didn't really care. "But, you know, they want me to eat some pretty strange things. I don't want to be compulsive about it or anything—"

Emily interrupted. "Steve's in charge of that. Believe it or not, he's our resident chef, and I think he intends for you to be extremely compulsive about it. We will be like an alcoholic's family, except that we'll be searching under your pillow for Hershey bars."

Woody instantly snatched the pillow off the bed, turning it over with a magician's grand gesture, showing both sides to proclaim its innocence.

Stop it, Emily wanted to say. *You're home now, you don't have to perform anymore.*

He must have sensed her thought for he laid the pillow down and when he spoke, all the glibness was gone. "I'm not quite clear on one thing—whose house is this? Do you all live here? Is this some kind of commune for yups?"

"No, it's my house. Everyone else is just visiting for one reason or another."

"It's a nice place," he said and then looked down at her left hand. "You live here alone? You aren't married? Who pays for it?"

Emily bit back the impulse to declare that she paid for it herself. "No, I've never married." Then she realized what he wanted to know. "No, Woody, Jeff and I broke up after the—" She had been about to say "after the accident." "—during freshman year. We went for years and years without seeing each other. Jeff did get married though. It was to someone he met in graduate school. But he's divorced now."

"Jeff got married?" Woody sat down on the bed. This was

the first time he had asked a question about Jeff. "Who was she? What was she like?" Clearly he found it strange that Jeff had married someone he didn't know. "Was she like you?"

"No, no, not at all." In fact, Emily suddenly realized, if Britta was like any of them, it was Woody that she resembled. "She was an illustrator, very talented, very creative—Jeff truly admired her. But she was also irresponsible, she didn't take care of herself, and he finally got tired of looking after her."

"He must have felt guilty about that." Woody was speaking so softly that Emily had to lean forward to hear, and for a moment, she felt like she was talking to Cal Kirkland, the voice of the early shows before C.J. had taken over, the voice that understood how awful it was to have your ears pierced wrong, the voice that was gentle, forgiving.

"You're right," she said. "He feels terribly guilty about it, that he couldn't go on. He shouldn't—he paid and paid, but I think some little part of him feels like he should have gone on sacrificing himself because she was so talented."

"What's he doing now? I don't read the papers much, but I think I would have heard if he had been elected president."

"He hasn't been yet. But he did write a very successful book." Emily explained about it. "But I don't think he plans on doing another one. Working on it may have been more a way to get out of his marriage than anything else. He's back home, in Nancy Hanks. He's teaching high school, English and journalism. He's got Mr. Crockett's job."

"Mr. Crockett's job?" Woody stared at her. "You aren't serious, are you?"

Emily nodded. "He's the faculty adviser to the paper, and all the girls have crushes on him. But I've met his journalism students, and he's great with them."

"He has Crockett's job?" Woody couldn't seem to believe it.

"Yes." Emily made her voice calm. Woody was clearly very upset by this news. Was it possible that he had realized in two minutes what it had taken her the summer to understand—how wrong it was for Jeff to be in this job, how his search for a role model, a father substitute, had trapped him? "It's not what he'll be doing forever, I'm sure, but it is what he's doing now."

Woody shifted his weight. The bed frame creaked. "Where's Crockett? Is he still teaching?"

"We don't know. He left Nancy Hanks after our senior year. No one knows where he went."

"After our senior year?"

Emily nodded.

Woody picked at the bedspread, not looking at her. It seemed clear he had something to say, but when he spoke, it was to change the subject. "I feel funny about being here."

"Because of the show?"

"What else?"

I think we should forget about it, Emily started to say and realized that was exactly what her mother would say. But it wasn't possible to forget it. "All I ask," she said instead, "is that while you're here, you try to think of me as Emily, not Leslie, that you try to see me as I am."

"Those people seem very far away."

"That's good." She stood up. "Now why don't you rest?"

Woody spent the day in his room, taking his meager lunch on a tray, but at six Emily heard him moving about—Woody's movements were easy to hear. When the guest room door opened, she called out, "We're in the kitchen."

Steve was at the sink, taking the skin off a chicken; Jeff was at the counter, making an oilless salad dressing. LeeAnn and Emily were in the booth. LeeAnn was doing her nails; Emily was doing nothing at all.

Woody's bulky shadow fell across the floor. "What's wrong with this picture?" he drawled.

Emily winced. This wasn't the man she had talked to in the guest room; this was C.J. Hanson.

Jeff started to answer, then stopped. "I like to cook," he said mildly. "I ate in the restaurant too much as a kid."

C.J. Hanson might have been insensitive, but Cal Kirkland was not. If there had been a competition, Jeff had won by refusing to play, and Woody knew it. He was quiet until they sat down to eat, and then his domination of the conversation at dinner took the form of asking obviously interested questions of Emily, Steve, and LeeAnn about their lives and their jobs. He did not speak to Jeff, and Jeff spoke only when Steve or LeeAnn was saying something he wanted to know more about.

Emily supposed that they were going to have to get used to this, these sudden changes from the bitter C.J. to the sympathetic Cal Kirkland, and they would probably get some visits from Woody, the class clown they had all known and loved.

What this man needed was to find out who Dave Woodman the adult was, and that wasn't going to happen until he had his health back. It might not happen at all. But Emily no longer assessed people as if they were investments. She, and everyone else at this table, felt loyal to Woody. That was what counted.

And at the moment, this loyalty was causing the greatest strain on Jeff.

As soon as everyone had finished eating the skinless chicken and oilless salad, Emily started to clear the table. Jeff got up to help her. When the kitchen door swung shut behind them, she set down the plates she was carrying and patted him on the arm. "I'm proud of you."

He shrugged, knowing exactly what she was talking about. "I figure we've got three prima donnas here, me, LeeAnn, and Woody. Something's got to give. It's enough to live in the Windy City; you don't need three gasbags going at once. LeeAnn can be quiet tomorrow."

"He was very interested in you this morning." Emily had told the others about her conversation with Woody. "He just can't deal with you face to face."

"And I imagine that sooner or later we'll find out why . . . but in the meantime, is there any dessert? I hate to admit it, but I'm still hungry."

Emily opened her tiny refrigerator. "Sliced peaches with no sugar."

"And I don't suppose we're going to put them over ice cream?"

Emily started filling the dessert bowls, although *filling* was not a very accurate term. "I think in about six weeks, we can each have one vanilla wafer."

Jeff eyed the carefully apportioned servings. "I have never before looked forward to the school lunches."

He picked up two bowls and carried them out into the dining room. He set one down in front of LeeAnn, then

came up behind Woody, setting one in front of him. He was just moving away when suddenly Woody gripped his arm.

Everyone froze. Emily heard the swish of the kitchen door swinging shut behind her, then silence.

"I didn't say anything about your father." Woody spoke without looking at Jeff even though he still had hold of his arm. "I never said anything about your father."

"I know that." Jeff's voice was gentle. "I appreciated it."

LeeAnn shot Emily a quick, puzzled glance. Emily shook her head slightly, promising to explain later.

"I'd think about you, and I'd keep coming around to it, that that is what explains Skip, that's why he is the way he is, but I never used it, not once."

Jeff hooked his foot around a chair, pulling it close so he could sit down without breaking Woody's grasp on his arm. "I knew you wouldn't. All summer I knew you wouldn't."

"But I almost did. You don't know how many times I almost did."

"But you didn't."

"No, I didn't . . . not that that excuses anything." Woody let go of Jeff and looked at the rest of them. "I don't know how to say this . . . it didn't seem to matter at first. I never thought of you as still being real, as having lives, and I didn't—"

"Wait a minute."

Steve had interrupted; Steve never interrupted. Emily went to the table and sat down to listen.

"I know that you're trying to apologize," Steve said, leaning forward, speaking earnestly. "Like you've hurt us somehow. But you haven't hurt me. At first I really hated hearing about Arnold, hated hearing you talk about him, but then Emily had me listen to all the old shows, and it occurred to me that he chose to be this way. Yes, he was shy, but he never tried, he never made an effort."

"You shouldn't be too hard on yourself," Jeff put in. "Life's rough on a shy adolescent, and making the choice to be otherwise isn't as easy as it would seem to an adult." Clearly he had seen many shy adolescents.

"But I'm an adult now," Steve answered. "And I can choose. I don't have to be so one-dimensional. I mean, I

used to walk out of a concert after the violin solo. I felt like I didn't have time to stay and enjoy the rest of the music. That's crazy, that's what I'm talking about, choosing only to be a violinist, nothing else. I can be a musician without being a nerdball. I've finally realized that I have that choice."

Choice—Emily realized how important that was. For the past year, she had been so angry with Stuart and Liz because they seemed to have the right to make choices that she couldn't make. Because they had families, they had the right to choose not to follow up every lead, not to go to every meeting. But that was wrong. She had the right to make those choices too. Her only grounds for being angry with Stuart and Liz were if they weren't willing to accept the consequences of their choices.

Steve was still talking. "You may not believe this, Woody, but as painful as it was, the show has been good for me."

Woody was looking down at his sliced peaches. Emily felt sure that he did not believe what Steve was saying. So she spoke. "The show's helped me too. All summer I was sure that no one would take me seriously if they found out that I was Leslie, but it didn't make any difference." Then she took a breath and went on. "And maybe more important, the show taught me a lot about Jeff." If Steve was making all his personal avowals in front of an audience, she could too. "I don't know that I ever understood him until your show."

Woody raised his head slowly, and when at last the great bulk of his neck had straightened, his eyes went straight to Jeff. He didn't say anything, but clearly what counted was Jeff's opinion.

"Listening to the show was painful," Jeff admitted. "But I can't see how it hurt me, and it has forced Emily and me to be honest with each other, and I don't know if we would have done it otherwise."

He leaned forward slightly, and under the cover of the table, Emily reached out and took his hand. After a moment, she pulled free and spoke to Woody. "Can I ask you a question about the show?" She wanted to ask about the accident, but there seemed like an easier question to ask first. "It's about Mr. Crockett. Why didn't you have him as a character?"

Woody stirred uneasily. "I don't know . . ."

Emily may have found that the easier question to ask, but Woody was obviously finding it hard to answer.

"I don't know," he repeated. "I guess it's just that things weren't as they seemed."

"Oh, we know that," Emily said quickly, wanting to reassure him. "Jeff figured it out this summer."

Woody's eyes jerked back to Jeff. "You did? You know?"

Jeff nodded. "I was looking at some of Emily's notes, and then it became clear."

"Emily's notes? What could have been on Emily's notes?"

"His comments, his outlines, all the things a teacher can do when he's overteaching."

"Overteaching?" Woody was bewildered. "What are you talking about?"

"What are *you* talking about?"

Woody looked away, not answering.

"Tell us." Jeff's voice cracked across the room. He was now all teacher, firm, leaving no room for questions, refusals. "There have been too many questions this summer, and we're all tired of being in the dark. What are you talking about?"

And in the instant before Woody spoke, Emily knew exactly what he would say. She didn't understand how everything fit together, but she knew for certain that it all did.

"The accident," he said, his words echoing her thoughts. "I'm talking about the accident." Woody pushed back from the table, his chair clattering to the floor. "Don't any of you understand what happened that night? What happened after you left? Why do you think he wanted me to stay?"

There was silence. Emily looked down at her grandmother's chair, lying on the floor. The chairs were heavy, not easily toppled. Then she looked at Jeff, catching his expression as the questioning look on his face faded and was replaced by sickened comprehension.

"Oh, God, Woody . . . no," he breathed. "Not that. He didn't, he couldn't have."

Woody spoke quietly. "He did."

Emily had no idea what they were talking about.

Jeff went on, his voice flat, all the feeling choked out of it.

"Was that the first time? Or was it happening all through school?"

"No, no." Woody rushed through the denial. "It was just that once, that was the only time."

"Don't try and defend him."

There was something in the sharpness of Jeff's voice, almost the sound of betrayal, and then Emily understood too. "Are you saying that Mr. Crockett . . . the night of the accident, after we left . . . that he *seduced* you?" She couldn't believe it. Mr. Crockett. Woody.

"I'm not gay," Woody said quickly. "I'm really not. I've never been with any other man, before or since. I'm not gay."

"But how long," Jeff snapped, "how long was it before you were sure of that?"

Woody didn't answer. He didn't have to. It had been a long, long time. Emily felt sick.

"So that's why you had C.J. driving," LeeAnn said, her voice cool. As an outsider, she could spell out what was too awkward for the others to name. "That's why you felt guilty, because of what was going on when the crash happened."

Woody nodded.

"But speaking rationally," she continued, knowing that only she, the experienced older sister, could play this role, "not that guilt is necessarily rational, what you were doing made no difference. You could have been sharing a peanut butter sandwich and the accident still would have happened. That guy was driving carelessly, that's all there is to it."

"But *why* was he driving carelessly?" Woody turned toward her impatiently, speaking with more energy than he had shown since he had stumbled into the house Monday night. "How do you think he felt coming out there and seeing me there?"

"What do you mean?" Emily was confused. "Not Bobby? Mr. Crockett didn't know him."

"The commencement speech." Woody sounded impatient, irritated with her for being so slow. "He helped him with the commencement speech."

"Oh, that's right," Jeff remembered. "I asked Mr. Crockett to help. Bobby and I made this deal junior year. He

wouldn't run for class president if I wouldn't try out for the commencement speech."

"And so you think that Mr. Crockett seduced him too?" Emily could hardly take all this in.

"No," Woody answered. "I don't think he laid a hand on him, but he must have made Bobby feel the way he made me feel—so special, so alive. And coming to see him that night, I don't imagine that Bobby admitted it to himself, but on some level he must have known that I was competition."

"Did you ever talk to Bobby about it?" LeeAnn wanted to know.

Woody shook his head. "No, but when you think about it, it's clear."

And no one doubted him, not after he had been right about so much else.

Then he turned back to Jeff, speaking only to him, not caring that anyone else was in the room. "I always knew that he liked me better than you, and I knew that bothered you, that you thought you deserved it. I rubbed it in, I never missed a chance to remind you. But I didn't know why he liked me better, didn't know that it was . . . that it was sexual, not until that night."

"So that's why you didn't come to graduation?" Emily asked.

Woody nodded.

"You could have said something," Jeff said. "Left a note . . . or written."

Woody shook his head. "What would I have said? But you wrote me, didn't you? In the spring. That's when I started doing the people. I didn't read your letter, but that's the night I started. I guess I was trying to reach you, trying to tell you. That's why I went on with the people, to make it up to you. The show was how high school should have been for you, without me or him. I thought that maybe this time I could make it right for you."

How could a radio show make it right? Emily wondered. What words would have undone the damage?

LeeAnn spoke to Woody. "But you were in it. You were C.J."

"I know," Woody sighed. "I don't understand what happened. I had this character all worked out, a nice girl, a B

student with strawberry blond hair, and the minute I got on the air, it all fell apart. I couldn't control it anymore. I'm so glad it's over."

"Are you?" Emily asked. "Are you really?"

He nodded. "I couldn't have ended it myself. It was only when I saw the Chicago paper that I could do it. I don't know how they found out all that stuff, but it was a blessing."

No one said anything. Finally Jeff spoke. "It was me. I told them."

"So it worked. So I did reach you."

Jeff nodded.

Woody stood up. He put out his hand. Slowly Jeff took it, gripping it for a moment. Then—and Emily wasn't sure who started it, Woody or Jeff—they embraced.

They broke apart, and in the release of tension, Steve and LeeAnn began to bustle about, getting everyone to eat their fruit, then clearing the dishes. Throughout the noise, Emily watched Jeff and as soon as she could, she touched his arm and gestured toward the stairs. They needed to be alone.

Up in her room, he went straight for the window, lifting aside the curtain to look at the street below. He was silent. Emily sat down on the bed, waiting. He seemed very alone.

At last he spoke. "I hate him."

"Mr. Crockett?" she asked, knowing the answer.

"I idolized him, Emily. I idolized him. He seemed perfect, everything anyone could want to be. He was poised, he was educated—that's what I wanted to be like. That's why I went into journalism."

"I know."

"And all through the stuff with the book, when my name was in all kinds of papers, I kept hoping I'd hear from him, hoping that he'd call and say he was proud of me. But he never did."

That had been almost thirteen years after high school. All that time, and Jeff had still cared, still wanted Mr. Crockett's approval. "So instead you're living his life."

Jeff turned away from the window, letting go of the curtain so abruptly that it caught, the pleats falling crookedly. "Well, perhaps . . . but I don't do their work for them, and I don't bugger them on the living room floor." He

sank down on the bed and buried his face in his hands. "Please help me, Emily, help me to stop hating him."

Emily sat down next to him, looking at the blue knit shirt pulling across his hunched shoulders. In all the years they'd known each other, this was the first time he had asked for her help. Even when he had been waiting outside her house with her high school notes in his hand, he hadn't admitted his need for her.

What was she to do? Send him to a good therapist, that was what she did with clients, but this was now, immediate. And he was no client. She loved him.

Ask me about investments; give me your money to take care of. I can help you there; I'm good at that. I don't think I'm so good at this.

This was why she had wanted him, had wanted all men, to be perfect. It wasn't that flawed men wasted your time; it was that they might need your help, the kind of help Emily believed herself so incapable of giving.

But however bad she was at it, this was what she had been called on to do. She had to help him now.

"Let's go home."

He lifted his head, puzzled. "To Nancy Hanks?"

"Yes. I don't know why, I don't know what good it will do, but I think we should go."

"What about Woody?"

"Steve and LeeAnn can take care of him."

They went downstairs. Emily stepped into the kitchen. Steve and LeeAnn were there alone, and she told them what they were going to do. Steve started to ask questions, but LeeAnn silenced him, knowing that Emily had no answers.

Jeff was waiting on the veranda. "Let's take my car," she said. "You can drive if you like."

"If you don't mind."

Emily had never before left for Nancy Hanks on five minutes' notice. When Jeff had driven up early in the month, her high school notes in hand, and then had driven back the next day, leaving only a note for her, she had wondered what kind of person could make four-hour drives so impulsively. Now she knew . . . and she was glad to be such a person.

The shadows were long across the Drive, but it was still

light when they were through the city, out into the country. It was August, and the sturdy goldenrod had replaced the spring's sweet violets. In the half-harvested fields of milo, massive combines waited for tomorrow's work. The dark, leafy soybean fields would be harvested next, followed by the corn, which the farmers would bring in through November as long as they could get in the fields. Then come February or March, as soon as the snow lifted, it would be time to plant the oats.

The sun's rosy glow faded, the world went gray, softened into darkness. The lights of the dashboard reflected in pinpoints on the face of Jeff's watch, and the car's headlights swept ahead of them, picking up the broken white line, the grass on the median strip.

Near Peoria, Jeff slowed, apologizing for speeding. "You don't know how fast you're going in a car like this."

"Don't worry about it."

As they approached town, Emily spoke. "Do you have a key to the high school?"

"I'm not supposed to."

Which meant that he did. "Then let's go there."

It was midnight. The parking lot was empty. Jeff pulled in the lot, parking by a door to the new wing. The pool, the new theater, they had all been added since Emily's time, and she didn't recognize the hall, the doors. They could have been in any high school, anywhere.

Then the new hall ended, and there was the glass wall of the main office, the bronze seal inlaid in the floor, the deep case filled with the art students' pottery. Even in the dark, it was all familiar, the locker-lined halls with the rows of round combination locks and chrome handles, the black rubber baseboard guard, the linoleum floor, an irregular pattern of old squares and paler new ones.

She followed Jeff to the stairs, divided from the corridor by the fire doors, sheets of glass sandwiching wire mesh. The stairs were tiled—the first flight centered and wide, then breaking back on the landing into two narrower stairs.

She had been on this staircase last spring, and then all she could think about was what she had missed—prom, graduation, Senior Assembly. Now she was aware of what she had had. It was at the base of this stairwell that she had told

Kitty about Jeff's first kiss; it was on the landing that Woody had told her that Mr. Crockett was hiring a lawyer for Jeff. Down the hall, she had seen Debby Triplett drop her books and cover her face when Mrs. Edwards had told her she'd been elected head cheerleader. In the rest room on this floor, she and Kitty and Julie had combed their hair every day of senior year.

She followed Jeff into the journalism room. He reached automatically for the light switch, and the harsh fluorescent glare illuminated a schoolroom waiting for classes to start. The chairs were inverted on the tops of the desks, the floor reflecting the overhead lights. The green chalkboard was clean, no notes about assignments; the bulletin boards were empty, the bookshelves were too. Some cardboard boxes were stacked in the corner; those would be the books, Jeff's books.

She hadn't thought to check when she had come in the spring—it hadn't seemed so important then—but now her eye went instantly to the space between the chalkboard and the window. Yes, still hanging there were the plaques, the awards they had received for the paper their senior year, the only awards the *Herald* had ever gotten. Usually such things were kept in the trophy cases that lined the lower halls, but Mr. Crockett had hung these in the journalism room.

Jeff noticed her glance. "We didn't deserve them," he said.

"I know." She went to a desk, flipped the chair so she could sit down.

But she hadn't gone to just any desk. She had unthinkingly, automatically, gone to the front desk on the third aisle, flipping the chair to the floor. That had always been her desk. For four years it had been hers. Jeff had sat next to her and Woody behind him. But tonight Jeff went over to the teacher's desk, Mr. Crockett's desk, his desk.

"It's odd to think of you as the teacher in here," she said.

He stopped behind the podium, smoothing his hand over it. "It feels like home now. At least it has."

He probably started a class from the podium, keeping his attendance book there as Mr. Crockett had done. But then he'd move around the room as he taught, alive, dynamic, but still comfortable . . . at home.

"Are you a good teacher?"

"I don't know what that means anymore," he answered. "I thought Mr. Crockett was a good teacher."

"Are you a good teacher?"

He smoothed his hand across the podium, not looking at her. "Your SAT record held for a long time around here."

"And?"

"Last fall one of my kids made an eight hundred on his verbal."

"Where's he going to school?"

"Yale. Last year we sent kids to Princeton and Brown. And the year before that to Harvard and Holyoke."

"Where did the money come from?"

"Everywhere. I killed myself helping those kids find scholarships. I remember what it was like having to go to a state school."

"How are they doing?"

"Fine. They can write, they can think clearly, they know what the questions are. They may be a little overwhelmed socially, but academically we get them ready." Then he started talking about each student, telling Emily their strengths, their weaknesses. He remembered them clearly, fondly. Then he told her about the students who were coming up, what plans they had, what ambitions.

Finally he stopped. "No, I'm not a good teacher. I'm better than good. I lied to you, I've been lying to myself." He shook his head. "I don't believe it. Here I thought I was so honest with myself, but I've been lying about the biggest thing. I don't like teaching, I love it. I need it. Nothing I've ever done before, not even having a book on the best-seller list or going on tour, is better than this, when they're all trying, when their minds are all clicking—it doesn't get any better than that."

"Then why do you talk about quitting?"

He looked at her, shaking his head, just now realizing all this about himself. "Because I didn't believe in myself. I've always wanted to be different than I am. I've always wanted to be great at one thing like Woody or Steve or Britta, instead of good at everything, but being good at everything . . . well, that's made me a great teacher."

For a month now, Emily had been praying for the day that

Jeff would leave teaching. Now she knew what a tremendous mistake that had been. What Jeff needed was not to leave teaching, but to do what he was doing right now, commit himself to it.

She spoke. "So can you forgive Mr. Crockett?"

He drew back. "What?"

"He's why you're a teacher. You might have become a teacher for the wrong reasons, but it was the right thing for you to have done. Maybe if we'd had a teacher who was less of a Svengali, you wouldn't have tried it. I don't know, but the point is, you're better off for having known him than you would be if you hadn't. So for that, you should forgive him."

"But what about what he did to Woody?"

"That's Woody's affair," said Emily. "And Woody has forgiven him. Woody needs to forgive himself . . . and he can't do that as long as he feels that by giving in to Mr. Crockett, he's done something to you."

Jeff looked at her. The first light of the morning was coming through the classroom windows across the ledge of the low bookcases, driving away the shadows. In a few more minutes, the light would creep across the floor, then over the desks onto the chalkboard until the whole room would be bright, full of the Illinois sunlight.

Jeff held out his hand. "Let's go back to the city."

nineteen

Much had changed for Emily this summer—her residence; her attitude about her job and about the men in her life; even her figure had changed. Woody's diet had left her weighing less than she had since high school. It had happened to all of them. LeeAnn had climbed up on a chair one night to declaim upon the new shapeliness of her tush. Steve, thin to begin with, was starting to look anorexic, and Jeff, who had spent a good long time in bed one night bemoaning Emily's decreasing resemblance to his sexual idol—Walt Disney's Merryweather—had developed an uncomfortably bony set of hips. But the important thing was that Woody was, in his own words, starting to exchange his King of the Whales look for a Prince of Wales look.

One thing in Emily's life had not changed, however. Alice blue was still Alice blue, and the ruffles on Emily's maid-of-honor dress were still as ruffly, the hoopskirt still as hoopy.

All the inmates of her house were coming to Kelly's wedding. Jeff had been invited long ago, and Emily had asked her sister if her other three friends could come as well. Woody and Steve wanted to see Bobby, and LeeAnn claimed that she never passed up an opportunity to buy a new dress.

Emily had left Chicago first, arriving home nearly a week

before the wedding, which was scheduled for the Saturday before Labor Day.

One hundred and twenty people were coming to the ceremony and then back to the house for the reception afterward. Glenda Gordon was, of course, making the food herself. Already in her basement freezer were two kinds of cake, two kinds of homemade ice cream, and four kinds of bread (sourdough white, whole wheat, Swedish rye, and buffalo chip pumpernickel). She was baking a whole ham and smoking three turkeys. Two days before the wedding she would start on three-bean salad, seven-layer salad, carrot salad, potato salad, and an array of appetizers. The pickles she had made last summer. The mayonnaise she would make the morning of the wedding. She was buying the mustard.

The front of the refrigerator door was covered with lists—lists of people, who would be arriving when, who was staying where; lists of food, what would be made when, what was stored where, what was to be eaten when. Glenda Gordon could not have put on this wedding without her side-by-side refrigerator-freezer. A normal icebox would not have had enough room for the paperwork.

Emily knew that there was one list not up there, a list of things that she was to be responsible for. *Emily is to make five appetizers, iron the tablecloths, polish the silver, and pick up the rented crystal.* Such a list would have made her very happy; with such a list she could decide what she was going to do when.

But what her mother needed was someone to follow her around, handing her this, peeling that. Grandma Postle refused, Leigh was too often distracted by the children, Kelly was the bride; that left Emily.

So Emily did one ninety-second task, then waited until her mother needed another ninety-second task done. Emily would stop slicing carrots to put fresh soap in the bathroom. She would interrupt kneading bread dough to run to the basement for another roll of paper towels. She did exactly what she was told when she was told and was a very good sport about it until ten o'clock each night when she would call Jeff and whine for an hour.

By Thursday there was food everywhere. It filled the

kitchen, the pantry, the deep freeze, the basement refrigerator, and several neighbors' refrigerators.

"Emily, will you do your mother a favor?" Jim Gordon asked as he maneuvered a ladder through the kitchen into the family room. He was wearing "Gordon Construction" overalls and had a tool belt slung around his hips.

Emily moved a box of champagne glasses out of his way. "What's that?"

"If you're going to get married, do it in February. That way she can use the entire back porch, perhaps the whole town, as a refrigerator."

Glenda did not enjoy being teased. "You have to admit that it would be easier," she said.

"What about it, Emily?" Jim continued. "Could you aim for February?"

"I'll do my best," Emily answered.

"Good girl. Now can you give me a hand out here?"

Emily followed her father into the family room. He set the ladder to reach the highest point of the cathedral ceiling. She steadied it as he climbed up, pulled a hammer from his tool belt, and drove a nail into the beam. He laid the hammer down on the top step and pointed to the sofa. "Could you get that for me?"

The sofa was covered with a long white something swaddled in plastic. "Is this Kelly's dress or something I have to peel for the potato salad?"

"Kelly's dress, I believe. Apparently the train is so long there's nowhere to hang it."

Emily located the hook of the padded hanger and with her arm high over her head, carried the dress over to her father. Jim came partway down the ladder to get it from her. The train reached nearly to the floor making the dress look like a ghostly piñata.

Four-year-old Andrew came into the center of the room, eyeing the dress. "Is that a tepee, Grandpa?"

Jim came down from the ladder. "I don't think so, but you'll have to ask your grandmother."

Andrew charged toward the kitchen, colliding with Kelly who was coming into the family room to tell Emily she was wanted on the phone. "It's Jeff."

Emily started eagerly for the kitchen phone, then changed

her mind, going off into another part of the house where she had a little privacy.

"Hi," she said. "Are you in town?"

He was. "How does a nice, long picnic out at the lake, just the two of us, sound?"

It sounded heavenly. It was also out of the question. The rest of the wedding party was arriving that morning, and wedding festivities were starting in earnest—a bridesmaids' luncheon at noon today, a cocktail party tonight, the rehearsal and the rehearsal dinner Friday. Emily frantically ran through the schedule, wondering when she could fit Jeff in.

And then she realized that she didn't have to. He wasn't serious about a picnic at the lake. He knew her family. He knew she wasn't a free agent. Here was the one single man in the world who did not expect her to drop everything just because he had called.

Emily did not know what the future held for the two of them—it had occurred to her that a working woman might do worse than to marry a man who liked to cook, got home in the middle of the afternoon, and had school holidays, snow days, and summers off. But if she had nothing more to look forward to than this lovely, calm feeling, the peace that came with the certainty of his affection, then she was better off than a lot of women.

"The only way I can possibly see you is if my mother needs to store potato salad in your refrigerator," she told him.

"Your mother can do whatever she wants with my refrigerator," he answered. "Otherwise I will see you at the wedding."

"You can't miss me. I'll be the one looking like Little Bo Peep."

Besides Emily, there were four other bridesmaids, and Alex had enlisted five of his fraternity brothers as ushers. As devoted as she was to Jeff Grant, Emily noticed instantly that these five ushers were glorious young men, tall, clear-eyed, and prepared to flirt with every female in or out of a hoopskirt. She found herself enjoying the rehearsal considerably more than she had expected to.

Because Nancy Hanks' restaurants were so uninspired,

Alex's parents gave the rehearsal dinner out at their lake house, which was across the water from the Gordons'. Emily had assumed she would spend the evening talking to her grandmother and helping with her nephews, but apparently the five ushers had been taught to be polite to their elders. By nine o'clock, this proud professional woman was in the bottom of a canoe, clinging to a life cushion and an usher, while another usher was balanced on the gunnels of the canoe, trying to propel it forward by swinging his arms, bending his knees, and jumping. Nor was this an isolated piece of folly, but a part of a three-canoe race, which meant that three young men spent the rest of the evening with wet hair, wet khakis, and wet polo shirts until one of them exchanged his clothes for a toga made of a blue-checked tablecloth splattered with barbecue sauce.

Fortunately one of the bridesmaids was a theater major, and on Saturday she gave lessons on managing a hoopskirt. To sit down, Emily learned, you smoothed your hands down the front of the skirt as you lowered yourself to a perch on the edge of the chair. To walk, you gave the hoop little kicks so that you and your clothing all moved at the same pace. When you climbed stairs, you lifted the hoopskirt so that it would not bang on the risers and send the back half of your dress swirling up around your fanny.

* * *

Saturday was a beautiful day, and sunlight sparkled through the church's stained glass windows. As the last of the guests were seated, Kelly and the bridesmaids gathered in the foyer, their dresses swirling and rustling as they moved. The rolling tones of the organ filled the church; the first of the bridesmaids, her skirt a swaying blue bell, began her glide down the red-carpeted aisle. Through the foyer's wide double door, Emily was able to see into the sanctuary, her eye searching for her friends.

A jewel-tinged shaft of light gleamed against the back of LeeAnn's glossy hair. Next to her, higher than the other heads, was Steve's curly mop. Woody's brown hair was next, and then, Woody's bulk forcing him to sit a little apart from the others, was Jeff.

The fourth bridesmaid started down the aisle. Emily

moved into the shadows under the choir loft, poised, waiting.

Last spring she had thought that this moment would be everything awful. She had expected to feel self-conscious about her age, her dress, her marital status. But in the rich light that glowed through the church, Jeff's hair shone coppery, and Emily was at peace. She felt like what she was: the bride's dearly loved sister. And when Kelly and Alex exchanged their vows, speaking the words they intended to say only once, Emily had to hold her eyes open wide to keep from crying.

* * *

While Glenda had been working in the kitchen, Jim Gordon had been in his yard. He had trimmed the acre and a half of grass, dug little trenches around the flagstone walks, and hosed the patio. He had planted white impatiens around the trunks of the oak trees and laid dark blankets of shredded mulch around the bedding plants, all blues this year: Chinese asters, cornflowers, Blue Danube petunias, and sweet williams. Gordon Construction had built a plywood dance floor in the orchard, and every card table in the neighborhood was on the lawn, set with white cloths and candles in blue globes. Some of Jim's friends had hurried back from the church to open champagne, and by the time the bride and the groom arrived, many of the guests were already feeling a bit splendid.

The food on the buffet table dwindled and was replenished. The late afternoon light went golden, then faded to a soft gray. Yellow flames dropped warm circles of light around the gas torches that lined the patio and walks. Electric floods, mounted in the trees, sent out a magic scatter of silver light and leafy shadows. The white satin of Kelly's dress shimmered in the dusk; her veil floated behind her, and to Emily, she seemed enchanted, spun out of moonlight and dreams.

Kelly and Alex cut the cake, danced their first dance. Each set of parents joined them, then Emily and the best man, then the rest of the wedding party. Emily danced with another usher, then with her father, her brother, more ushers, neighbors, her father's business associates. As gor-

geous as the ushers were, she liked dancing with the older men. They knew how.

She was dancing with Mr. Marsh—Mrs. Marsh was in her mother's bridge club—when suddenly he straightened and let go of her. At his shoulder was Jeff. He had cut in. Emily didn't know people still did that.

She had hardly spoken to him, Woody, Steve, and LeeAnn. They had been at the end of the reception line, and by then she had been so glassy-eyed that she could only say how nice it was of them to come, a piece of eloquence that had prompted a wicked gleam in Woody's eye. Fortunately, Jeff and Steve had dragged him off before he could speak.

By now, Jeff had, like many of the men, taken off his jacket and loosened his tie. His dark vest fit closely, tapering the folds of his white shirt, emphasizing the lean, athletic lines of his form.

"Did you really cut in?" she asked.

"I can't believe it." He seemed amazed at himself. "I've never done anything like that before."

"Well, you're about to discover that it wasn't worth the effort."

"I can't believe that," he replied gallantly and tried to put his arm around her waist. He was instantly much less gallant. "This stupid dress. You might as well be in the next county."

"It's kept me virtuous all evening."

"I suppose I should be grateful for that," he acknowledged. He waited for a downbeat and then taking her hand firmly, began to dance. The trio was playing a waltz, and the better dancers were gliding across the dance floor in swirling sweeps . . . and among those better dancers were Emily and Jeff.

Emily was amazed. She had been to a great many dances with Jeff Grant, and in those adolescent days his dancing technique had been of the "let's get through this" variety. Complicated maneuvers were achieved through a verbal warning, "What do you say we go this way?" But now he had a repertoire of hand-cues and eye-cues, all the refinements Emily thought were known only to men twice his age.

"What's going on?" she asked as she emerged unharmed from some complicated twirl. "You can't dance like this."

"If you're going to be Scarlett O'Hara," he said, spinning her again, "then why can't I be Rhett Butler?"

Emily's dress finished the spin a few seconds after she did. "Because you give a damn."

He groaned. "That makes me sound so boring."

"But it's true, isn't it?"

"Hush up. I can't talk and dance at the same time."

So Emily hushed up and let Jeff swirl her through the soft evening light. The music rose and fell, and Emily knew that she was falling in love.

Not with Jeff. No, for better or for worse, she had loved him for a long time and would go on loving him for a longer time still. No, tonight she was falling in love with her dress, with her wonderful Alice blue satin dress.

It was the most delicious thing she had ever worn. The flounce over the bodice caressed her arms, moving as she moved. The skirt swayed as she glided across the dance floor, brushing against the other couples, the satin capturing the torchlight in gleaming folds.

When the music at last ended, Jeff stepped back, his eyes shining, and Emily looked up at him, knowing that her expression matched his.

He spoke before she could. "Now don't say that was better than sex."

"What if it was?"

"Well, at least you can ask me where I learned to dance whereas my sexual prowess must forever remain a mystery."

He had a point. "I don't need to ask. I can guess. A bunch of girls who had crushes on you asked you to chaperone the prom, and you couldn't bear to have them know what a crummy dancer you were so you got my sister to teach you."

He grimaced. Obviously she was right. "You're wrong—my instructress was my neighbor's mother. Shall I convey your compliments to her?"

"Please. And in the meantime will you shut up and start dancing?"

"It looks like the band is taking a break." Jeff gestured across the dance floor to where the musicians were standing up, stretching. Glenda was there, almost certainly offering them food. "Let's go find Steve and LeeAnn and Woody. They want to see you too."

That sounded fine to Emily. "Can we grab a bottle on our way?"

By now, the bartending arrangements had gotten quite informal. The bottles of champagne were on ice in round green tubs that were, in their everyday lives, children's wading pools. The five gorgeous ushers were walking around with a bottle in each hand, refilling every glass in sight.

But when Jeff straightened up from the ice-filled Mr. Turtle pool, he had two bottles of ginger ale.

"I think you've had too much to drink," Emily pointed out. "You can't read labels anymore."

"I haven't had a thing to drink. Woody's diet, remember?"

Emily shuddered.

Woody, Steve, and LeeAnn were sitting on the white wrought-iron garden set over by the Persian lilacs. Emily lifted her skirt to cross the ivy, then waved Steve to move off the two-man seat and after settling some of her ruffles, gracefully sank down, her dress billowing around her.

Jeff tucked the ginger ale under his arm and applauded.

Emily ignored him. "What do you all think of my dress?" she asked the others.

"I hate it," LeeAnn said bluntly.

"I don't know . . ." This was from Steve. "I kind of like it. It looks so great, all of you in your dresses, sweeping around. Everywhere a person turns, there's one of those blue dresses."

Emily patted him on the hand, then turned to Woody, batting her eyelashes, something she couldn't recall ever doing before.

He did not seem impressed. "I'm glad you'll have something to wear Tuesday night."

She sobered. "Tuesday night? What are you talking about?"

"Didn't Jeff tell you? You have a date Tuesday night."

"A *date?*"

"Yes. Someone called earlier in the week, and we accepted for you."

"*Woody* accepted for you," LeeAnn put in.

"My God, who is it with?"

"I forget his name." Woody waved his hand, dismissing that unimportant detail. "But I think Jeff wrote it down. Anyway, it's some guy who called you in the middle of the summer and you said you weren't dating until after Labor Day and—"

"Brian Orleckey? He actually called back?"

"He did indeed. He said he was calling your bluff, and well, we just *knew* you'd want to see him, he seemed like such a nice fellow."

Emily glanced over her shoulder at Jeff. He was laughing. "Thank you. Thank you, all of you." It would serve him right if she went to bed with Brian Orleckey. "Why didn't you vandalize my house as long as you were at it?"

"Oh, we did that too," Woody answered.

A date? Oh, God . . . no, she wasn't going to think about it. That was the one advantage to being dressed like Scarlett O'Hara. It was only appropriate that you defer all thoughts until tomorrow.

Emily heard a sharp whistle and looked up to see her brother gesturing at her. A crowd of young women was forming around one of the picnic tables. She stood up and grabbed LeeAnn's hand. "Come along, we've got a job to do."

LeeAnn got up. "I hope it has something to do with these groomsmen. I'm really interested in them."

"It could have something to do with them. Kelly's about to throw the bouquet."

LeeAnn stopped dead. "You can count me out. I'm not catching any wedding bouquet."

"We don't have to catch it. We can stand in the back, we can put our hands in our pockets."

"My dress doesn't have any pockets. And even if we stand in back, I'm tall. I'll make too good a target. Besides I wore yellow for that man. Isn't that enough?"

One day last week, Steve had, to the astonishment of all the inhabitants of Emily's house, braved the Marshall Field's lingerie department, a solitary warrior among the nylon and lace, having armed himself with LeeAnn's size by looking inside one of her dresses, a bit of tactical genius that no one would have ever given him credit for. He returned

from the war with his trophy, a peignoir set much like what Emily had been wearing the night she had turned off Woody's show, except this one was a daffodil yellow.

It was a lovely shade of yellow, glowing of sunshine and spring, but it had to be one of the few things on earth capable of making LeeAnn Summer look awful. Even as she had held the gown up from the box, her shimmering bronze coloring had turned sallow, and an unflattering light had accentuated every sign of her thirty-three years.

Emily had expected LeeAnn to say everything gracious about the nightgown and then exchange it, but she hadn't. Jeff had insisted that she model it—he was, Emily felt sure, a lot less interested in LeeAnn's coloring than he was in other parts of her—and when she emerged, she had already cut off the price tags. The next morning when she had come upstairs for the cup of coffee she always had before her shower, she was wearing it.

Emily suspected that this was the greatest compromise LeeAnn had made for another person since leaving Oklahoma. It was too much to expect her to catch a bridal bouquet.

But Emily did not intend to catch the bouquet either. "You know your problem, LeeAnn?" she said as she swept her along.

"No, Emily, what is my problem?"

"You haven't had enough to drink."

"That's certainly true."

They joined the other women—the other *girls*—staying well to the rear, just as Alex was helping Kelly up onto the table. Kelly was laughing, but she was also looking.

And Emily knew for what.

"I wish I was as short as you," LeeAnn complained.

Kelly was still looking.

Oh, what the hell? Why not make it easy for her? Emily circled round the back of the pack and came up at the edge, in the clear, not ten feet from her sister. She waved and Kelly's face brightened.

This bride could hurl a softball from center field dead into a catcher's mitt. Ten feet and a bridal bouquet were nothing. She poised, set, and shot. Emily extended one hand, and the beribboned projectile landed square in her grip.

Emily had been at a wedding where there had actually

been a fight over the bouquet, a bridesmaid and a cousin pulling and tugging until the petals dropped from the blossoms and the ribbon-covered wires twisted apart. But that had been a big hotel wedding out East. This was a nice Midwestern affair, and not one of Kelly's pretty sorority sisters thought that she needed any help from superstition and tradition. Of course, they would get married, no question about it, it was guaranteed. So they crowded around Emily cheerfully, congratulating her, teasing her, moving aside when Kelly came up to hug her.

Their hoopskirts collided. They abandoned their embrace and started off across the lawn together, the satin of their dresses glistening. Someone handed them glasses of champagne, and then someone else stopped Kelly. Emily drifted on, going nowhere in particular, a bridal bouquet in one hand, a glass of champagne in the other.

The night was warm. The shadows under the trees were sooty and soft, the champagne golden. The music from the orchard filtered through the apple trees, and all around Emily, people were laughing, the sparkling night transforming the most ordinary talk into jewel-rich sounds. Her dress rustled with whisper-secrets to whoever might be listening.

And there was one man who would be listening, one man who knew her well enough to understand the message encoded in glowing folds of the delicate satin. She saw him, across the flagstone walk, still coatless, the white sleeves of his shirt, the V of his collar beneath his dark vest shining in the light.

He was waiting for her, and as she approached, he put out his hand. But she was still holding the bouquet and the champagne glass so he could do nothing more than take the glass from her and gesture at the bouquet. "Are we supposed to congratulate you?"

There was so much to be said . . . no, there was so much other people could have said, people whose language was blessed with a silvery poetry that Emily could not even dream of. But that was all right. She didn't need such fluency as long as it was Jeff that she was with. She might lack the language, but she felt all that she should, and he knew that. She didn't have to try to be someone else.

"Either congratulate me or run in terror."

"No." He was smiling, his voice warm. "I'm not going to do that."

They sat down on a picnic bench off to the side of the buffet tables. Her dress billowed over his leg, buttery soft, lustrous. She wanted to touch him. He had kissed her cheek in the receiving line, but except for the warmth of his hand at her waist, it could have been the kiss that anyone gives a bridesmaid . . . and there was so much more between them than that.

His hand came toward her, but his slender fingers, brown from the summer sun, touched the white roses of her sister's wedding bouquet, tracing the delicate edge of a petal, brushing against the soft tip of asparagus fern. "Wouldn't it be nice if we were meeting for the first time tonight?"

Meeting for the first time?

That was every bridesmaid's fantasy, wasn't it? That the best man would be someone special, and not just someone, but the one, a person who was as right as Emily knew Jeff to be for her.

But what made them right for each other? It was their past, and coming to understand that past through Skip and Leslie. It was high school; it was the tormented nights of that first summer they had spent together; it was the lazy, golden afternoons of this summer.

She shook her head, her thick hair brushing softly against her bare shoulders. "No, I'd never give up what we've been to each other."

"I suppose not." He took the bouquet from her, and moving aside the folds of her dress, laid it between them. "Anyway, if we were meeting for the first time, you wouldn't have one thing to do with me because I teach school."

His voice was brisker, and Emily understood what he was doing. Once before they had done something foolish, something more than foolish, because of the way honeysuckle smelled on a June night.

So she didn't deny what he had said. "How are things at school? Is it good to be back?"

After the two of them had returned from their predawn visit to Nancy Hanks, Jeff's lethargy, his disinterest in the coming school year, had disappeared. He had been busy,

drafting student recommendations, planning a new unit on the World War I poets.

"It's good to be back," he said now. "No, it's great. I can't wait for the kids to come on Tuesday, but I did tell the principal and the English department that I wouldn't be back next year, that I'm going to start circulating my resume to schools in the city."

"Oh?" Emily felt a bright surge, a sudden radiance. Jeff was coming to the city.

"A teacher in a city has privacy that we don't have in Nancy Hanks. I can have a life of my own, and I need that."

Yes, he did. He needed to be in a city; he also needed to be out of Mr. Crockett's classroom. This had nothing to do with the scent of honeysuckle. This was real, it was right. "Are we talking about any city in particular?"

"You know we are," he answered and now he did take her hand. "I want to commit my life to teaching, but I don't think I should unless you are a part of that life. Without you, I would end up like him."

Emily was confused only for an instant. With Jeff, there was still only one "him," Mr. Crockett.

"I'd never seduce a student," he said, and Emily could feel the grip on her hand tighten. "Not even one of the girls. But it's a question of investing too much in them, then needing too much from them in return, more than they should have to give. That's how good teachers become bad ones. I'm sure that's what happened to him. We became too important to him, because he didn't have anything else. As much as I love the classroom, if you aren't going to be in my life, I think it would be a mistake for me to go on teaching."

"And I don't want you in my life unless you are teaching."

He moved closer, and even though it might crush her sister's flowers, Emily leaned toward him, but they were sitting in a circle of torchlight so he could do nothing more than kiss her cheek.

"So what happens to Skip and Leslie now?" she asked.

"As soon as Skip's teaching contract is up in June, he moves into Leslie's house. For about five and a half, maybe six weeks, they are very careful, then they start getting careless, then they start getting deliberately careless, and if

need be, they work very hard at being careless. When Leslie gets pregnant, they get married and work their damnedest at living happily ever after."

He had a point. That was the way many of their contemporaries married, living together for years, then marrying when children became an issue. She shook her head. That wasn't right; they could do better than that. "I don't want to drift into this, Jeff. Either we make a commitment to each other or we don't."

He agreed. "I drifted into the second most important thing in my life, teaching. I'd like to think I'm capable of making a rational, considered decision about the most important thing."

Emily couldn't help thinking how ironic this was. Here she had always gotten everything she wanted by plodding away, by putting one size four-and-a-half sensible pump in front of the other. Now this she had gotten only by renouncing the quest.

And just in time too. The Great American Husband Hunt was supposed to start up again on Tuesday.

"So how long do you need to make a rational, considered decision?" she asked. "I do have a date on Tuesday, and I'd need to know how hard I have to work."

"I shouldn't need too long," he answered. "Especially as your great-aunt says that you've got a handmade tablecloth and bedspread riding on this decision."

Emily stared at him. "Aunt Tilda?" She covered her face and groaned. "Did she tell you that?"

"No, she didn't tell *me*. She's telling everyone. She's stationed herself in front of your sister's gift table and is spreading the word that yours are even better than Kelly's."

Emily groaned again.

Jeff patted her hand. "Look on the bright side. She didn't have a sign-up sheet, nor is she asking all the single gentlemen if they want to draw straws. Anyway, a tablecloth and bedspread is a better reason to marry me than my first wife had. Now when do you want to do this?"

"I don't know." Emily had not given the question any thought. "What do you think?"

Before he could answer, a shadow fell across the folds of her dress. She looked up. It was her father.

"You two look like you're having a nice time," he said.

"I can't speak for Emily," Jeff answered pleasantly, "but I'm enjoying myself."

"It has worked out well, hasn't it? But what on earth are we going to do with all this food?" Jim gestured back toward the buffet tables. "And there's more in the kitchen."

"I'm not taking it home," Emily said although she knew her words were futile. When she got in her car Monday afternoon to drive to Chicago, on the back seat would be a cooler full of carefully wrapped leftovers—ham, turkey, bread, salads, cake. They were in her future just as surely as Jeff Grant was.

"Most of it will freeze, won't it?" Jeff asked. "You can wrap it up and serve it at Emily's wedding."

"Emily's wedding?" Jim drew back, puzzled, but in a moment, their expressions told him everything. "Emily . . . sweetheart . . ." He pulled her to her feet, hugging her. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I said we were enjoying ourselves," Jeff pointed out.

Jim kept one arm around Emily as he shook Jeff's hand. Then he hugged Emily again. "Have you told your mother? She'll be beside herself. I'll go get her. Don't move. I'll be right back."

Emily and Jeff sat back down on the bench and watched as Jim extricated Glenda from a conversation. She tried to stop at the dessert table to straighten one of the trays; she tried to pick up some empty glasses, but Jim had his hand under her arm urging her on.

Emily knew that her mother hated surprises as much as Emily herself used to. So she was direct. "Jeff and I are getting married."

"Emily!" And if Glenda hated this surprise, she showed no sign of it. "Oh, Emily . . . how wonderful, and to Jeff . . . oh, Jeff dear, after all this time . . ."

She stopped, as if embarrassed by her display of emotion. "But what will people give you? You already have your china and silver."

Worrying about wedding gifts seemed hopelessly trivial, but Emily now understood that her mother's unrelenting attention to the practical, the material, was a defense against the emotions that had battered her as a young woman.

"People can give me their love, their good wishes," Emily answered. That's all she needed, anything else she could buy herself. "No, by God, cancel that. They can give me fondue pots, that's what I would have gotten if I had married Jeff back when I was eighteen, tons and tons of fondue pots. I haven't got one, and I want one."

Glenda didn't quite get the joke, but after a moment's pause—during which Emily imagined her mother was trying to remember if she had an extra fondue pot in her basement that she could send back to Chicago along with all the leftovers—she pulled at her husband's arm, telling him to go find Wyatt and Leigh, she'd get Kelly and Alex so Emily could tell them too.

Emily sat back down and looked sideward at Jeff. "You know, I have a date Tuesday night. This isn't such a great time to be announcing an engagement."

"Don't worry. After the things Woody said to that guy, he will be thrilled to find himself out of the running."

"Especially if the best my parents can come up with for a wedding is leftovers."

"I would have thought you would have wanted a quiet wedding."

Emily would have thought so too, but she would have been wrong. "No, I want this. I want to have a bouquet, I want to have too much food, I want to be unbelievably overdressed. You're the one who said I probably wasn't embarrassed often enough. Do you mind a real splash?"

"Not a bit. If you want to make a monkey of yourself, that's fine with me."

"Emily? Make a monkey of herself?" LeeAnn was suddenly in front of them, a tall slender figure in a shimmering beaded gown. "When is this going to happen?"

"The same time it happens to you," Emily told her. "I hope you like this dress I'm wearing."

"I don't," LeeAnn answered. "I already told you that."

"That's too bad because you'll wear it next."

"I'm doing no such thing. I'm not even going to ask why you could contemplate such an event." LeeAnn turned as if to go and then stopped, curiosity not letting her leave. With the low-cut back of her dress still toward them, she said, "Okay, tell me. Why am I going to be wearing something

that will make me look like a Cabbage Patch Doll trying to squeeze into a Barbie dress?"

"Because I'm getting married, and I'm wearing my sister's dress and you and she are going to wear these."

LeeAnn swirled around. "You're what?" Then she got control of herself. "You've had too much to drink."

"Jeff hasn't had anything to drink, and it was his idea."

"My wearing that dress was his idea?"

Emily had to admit that that particular detail had been her own invention. "But the getting married was his."

"I don't object to that. It's not anything I'd do, but if you want to, you won't be the first. It's the clothes I mind. Promise me, you'll get a different dress."

Emily was willing to do that. "But it's still going to be white—"

"That's fine."

"With a train and a veil."

"That's fine too. Just so long as it's designed for a grown-up. And promise me also, that if I have anything to do with this, I have some say over my dress."

Emily was willing to promise that too.

"And finally, I want the ushers to be as good-looking as these."

Emily couldn't promise that. "Ushers are Jeff's department."

Jeff looked across the lawn, and the women followed his gaze to where Steve and Woody were talking to Bobby Hutchinson—Steve with his straw-colored mop and thick glasses, Woody still quite portly.

"I take it that's a no," LeeAnn said.

"I'm afraid so," Jeff admitted.

"Oh, well," LeeAnn sighed. "I'll go get them. I'm sure if you give Woody time to lose enough weight, he'd be happy to wear one of these blue dresses."

She moved away, leaving them alone.

"When do you want to do all this?" Jeff asked. "Soon or when my contract is up in June?"

Emily hardly knew. "My dad wants me to do it in February, and we should do it before June. I'm going to be busy in June. That's when I have to decide whether or not to have children."

"Children? In June?" Jeff looked like he didn't know whether or not to laugh. "What is this, something on your calendar?"

"Absolutely," she lied. "June 17. On that day I have to decide whether to be impregnated by a random stranger, whether to adopt whatever sort of child they give single women, or whether to have my tubes tied."

"That's a weird set of choices."

"It didn't used to be. Three weeks ago it was fairly realistic. But if you want to have any input into this decision, you'd better—"

"Input?"

Emily conceded that it had been an unfortunate word choice. "You'll have to drive the afternoon car pools."

"I can probably manage that. I might even be good at it."

Of course he would be. He was good at everything. Emily moved as close to him as her dress would allow, leaning her cheek against his arm. She could see three groups of people converging on her, her mother leading Kelly and Alex, her father with Wyatt and Leigh, LeeAnn with Steve, Woody, and Bobby Hutchinson.

It was very late, and the wedding guests were leaving. They needed to thank the Gordons and say good-bye to Kelly and Alex so the progress of the first two groups was as halting as the third who were having to slow their steps as Bobby maneuvered his wheelchair around the little clusters of people still celebrating.

And last year Emily would have shared their impatience. She would have gotten up and gone to them—she would have had to—but this time, with Jeff at her side, she could wait.

KATHLEEN SEIDEL

AGAIN

Jenny Cotton is head writer on *My Lady's Chamber*, the hot new tv show breaking all the rules of soap opera. She has everything she could possibly want: a long-term boyfriend, a job she loves, respect and admiration from her colleagues.

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HODDER AND STOUGHTON PAPERBACKS

KATHLEEN SEIDEL

TILL THE STARS FALL

Krissa was intelligent and hard-working, a pretty girl sheltered from a violent father by the brother she idolised.

Danny was restless and rebellious, a dark-eyed miner's son determined to escape, with his sister, the iron mines of Minnesota.

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Until the two men meet. Drawn together by the two passions they share – music and Krissa – Danny and Quinn reach the dizzy heights of success as one of the hottest rock groups of the mid-Seventies. But today, those same passions threaten to destroy the very things the three had fought for – their happiness and a future together . . .

HODDER AND STOUGHTON PAPERBACKS

SUSAN MOODY

THE ITALIAN GARDEN

Hannah was twenty-two that summer in Italy. Long days of silent, unbreathable heat, violence in the air, nights full of fireflies and explosive prohibited love. It was the summer that she met Lucas and learned the secrets of her own sensuality, discovering herself as he discovered her. And discovering, too, that passion can destroy.

Twenty-five years later, Hannah's life is passionless, ordinary, safe. She has been punished enough for what happened. But others disagree. And when her family is threatened Hannah knows that she must face the truth of that summer in the Italian garden – before it's too late.

HODDER AND STOUGHTON PAPERBACKS

Emily and Jeff were high-school sweethearts and Woody was their best friend. They thought they knew what the future held in store for them. Emily would marry Jeff; he would be a great writer and she a brilliant scholar and Woody had all the charisma to be a film star. But a terrible car accident the night before graduation altered their plans and the course of their lives forever. Afterwards, Woody disappeared and by the time Emily had fully recovered, Jeff was gone too.

Fifteen years later, and a few attempts by Jeff and Emily to get back together, Emily hears Woody's voice as a DJ on a late night rock 'n' roll radio show. She decides to face the past and the fact that maybe this time she and Jeff can get it right . . .

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